Brian W. Aldiss

Oxford

Although the 1959 World Convention in USA voted Brian Aldiss "the most promising new author" of the year (based on his 1958 puhlished works), the voters' opinion was already outdated. By the time their decision had heen made puhlic, author Aldiss had already consolidated his position and estahlished himself as one of our most prominent writers. 1960 will see a positive rash of new works from him—hoth novels and short stories.

Commenting upon his current serial he states, "Science fiction stories featuring galactic empires have always intrigued me, partly hecause I had the chance of seeing at first hand the uneasy relationship existing hetween 'imperialists' and suhject races in India and Indonesia. So there's a galactic empire in *X For Exploitation*, with Earthmen on the receiving end as suhject race. The plot hinges on the notion that the further spread your empire is, the greater are the opportunities for graft therein.

"So the villains of the piece are not so much the all-conquering *nals*, as the size of the galaxy and the economics involved in its rule. At the same time, the fact that the four central characters each have good reason to mistrust the other three does complicate things.

"I hope it doesn't complicate things too much. Van Vogtian complexities of plot and sub-plot are not for me. "X" aims at heing a simple study of four pretty hard types each trying to out-think the other. I offer my apologies to the inhahitants of Easthourne for wrecking their pleasant town in the process."

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

No. 92

VOLUME 31

2/6

New Serial

X FOR EXPLOITATION

Part One

Brian W. Aldiss

Short Stories

ZONE OF TERROR

J. G. Ballard

PROFESSION: SPACEMAN

Kenneth Bulmer

BADMAN

John Brunner

BILL OF SALE

Wynne N. Whiteford

THE THIRD WORD

David Porter

THE PATHFINDERS

Donald Malcolm

Article

TELL-TAIL

Kenneth Johns

Features

14th Year of Publication

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

VOLUME 31

No. 92

MONTHLY

MARCH 1960

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

Cover painting by LEWIS illustrating "X For Exploitation"

TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

Subscription Rates

Great Britain and the Commonwealth (excluding Australia) 12 issues 34/- post free

North America 12 issues $6.00 post free

Published on the last Friday of each month by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.,

Maclaren House, 131 Great Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1.

Telephone : HOP 5712

Sole Distributors in Australia : Gordon & Gotch (Australia) Ltd.

In New Zealand : Messrs. P. B. Fisher, 564 Colombo Street, Christchurch, N.Z.

All characters in these stories are purely fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is entirely coincidental. No responsibility is accepted for material submitted for publication but every care will be taken to avoid loss or damage. Return postage must be included with all MSS.

Printed in England by The Rugby Advertiser Ltd., Albert Street, Rugby

Soul Searching . . .

There is no doubt that during the past few years the entire trend of science fiction has changed considerably. This is a periodic cycle, but each one differs from the previous and alters the pattern. One of the current focal points was the launching of the various space probes, pointing up the fact that science was catching up with fiction. At the moment, no-one seems to quite know what the new shape of s-f will be although those who follow the genre closely feel that the new face is likely to be better than any which has gone before.

Meanwhile, some deep soul-searching has been going on amongst some sections of the s-f community, which give pause for thought. A recent questionnaire sent out to leading amateurs and professionals in America and Great Britain by bibliophile Earl Kemp, of Chicago, posed some pertinent questions, the general answers to which Mr. Kemp proposes publishing privately for those who took part. Bearing in mind that this particular questionnaire was designed *primarily for the American field*, the relevant questions are still worth passing on in view of the change taking place in our own market. With Import restrictions lifted we shall soon see original U.S. editions of magazines and pocketbooks on sale in Great Britain and this added competition will certainly have some effect on our own market, small though the percentage of s-f titles will be.

Headed "Who Killed Science Fiction?" Mr. Kemp's questions were :

1. Do you feel that magazine science fiction is dead ?
2. Do you feel that any single person, action, incident, etc., is responsible for the present situation ? If not, what is responsible ?
3. What can we do to correct it ?
4. Should we look to the original paperback as a salvation?
5. What additional remarks, pertinent to the study, would you like to contribute ?

Mr. Kemp's deadline for replies is now long past, but if any of you feel that you want to answer these questions from the British viewpoint, the pages of *Postmortem* are wide open for an airing of pet ideas and theories.

At about the same time as I received the Kemp questionnaire the first issues of a new Australian fan magazine entitled

Quantum arrived, published by John M. Baxter, 29 Gordon Rd. Bowral, New South Wales. In a leading article titled " Just where is science fiction today ?" Mr. Baxter indirectly answers some of Mr. Kemp's questions, although he would not have known about them at that time, but looks back further than the cross-roads of 1958 for the beginning of the current change.

" The heavy emphasis placed on technology," he writes, " by the major powers since the war has given the general public an enormously increased awareness of science. and the part it plays, and will play in its life. This has led to an increased consumption of scientific literature, but not necessarily of science fiction.

" Up to a few years ago, there was very little science in science fiction, despite the name. The accent was on fantasy, with a slight scientific flavour, and it was only occasionally that any pure s-f was printed. People who have the kind of mind that likes s-f just weren't impressed by it and so turned to the science-fact material that is so readily available. It was this emphasis on science that at last forced apart the s-f and fantasy worlds. Men like Bradbury, Sturgeon, Sheckley and Matheson have abandoned s-f for the more lucrative fantasy field, in which they excel, leaving pure science to those authors who have mastered it. All the leading magazines have begun to feature a factual scientific article every issue.

" Many die-hard fans maintain that this accent on technology is disastrous, and spcak at great length on ' losing sight of humanity.' Although they no longer read the fantasy-type yarn, they still yearn for the homely-type story, typified by the sort of thing found in *Science Fantasy* . . . they completely lose sight of the objective of science fiction—to make one think, and fail to realise that it is not the individual human being that is important, but his culture as a whole.

" We are now in a position where we can demand accuracy in s-f rather than passively taking what is handed out by the publishers. There is a large enough public buying s-f to force authors and publishers to produce work that will ensure their continued popularity with this segment of readers, and that segment wants science."

Well, there you have one man's reasoning on a possible solution—more science in science fiction. Is he right ? Or does he only speak for a small section of the large readership ? Your own opinion will be just as important to myself and the authors.

John Carnell

In this new Brian Aldiss serial, Earth has long been a centre for corruption amongst the ruling aliens, the nals. So far-flung is their Empire that the planet is just a mote in the galaxy—with little chance of Earthmen ever rectifying their fate.

X FOR EXPLOITATION

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

Part One of Three Parts

prologue

The name of this particular planet was Stomin. On the night side of it, a nal called Wattol Forlie was lying on a low wall, looking up at the sky. The thoughts in his head were as randomly scattered as the stars at which he gazed.

He had no cause for optimism, yet he was optimistic. He was many light years from home—yet homesickness had no part in him. He had only one bit in his pocket, yet his gambler's nature assured him money was easy to come by. His past actions had already started a chain of events upon which the destiny of one world—and perhaps even of the galaxy—hung : yet had he been aware of this, it is doubtful if Wattol Forlie would have done more than smile.

Not that he was a fatalist ; he believed in the importance of every action. He also believed that in a galaxy of four million civilized planets those actions would eventually cancel each other out.

As he was reflecting with delight on the complexity of his own character, a voice from three feet away said coldly, " Raise your hands and sit up, and keep quiet about it."

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Wattol disliked such treatment, especially on an alien planet. He knew that the mis-shapen inhabitants of Stomin would happily melt him or any other nal down for the sake of his blubber content without thinking twice about it. Still making no attempt to move, he swivelled an eye stalk to observe his opponent.

Through the dark, he saw a tripedal figure much like his own.

" Does your being a nal entitle you to act like this ?" he enquired lazily.

" Sit up, brother. I'll ask the questions."

Wattol spat.

" You're no ordinary thug, or you'd have had the sense to shut me up without all the dramatics. Come and tell me what you want like a civilized being."

The figure came nearer, angry now.

" I said to sit up—"

As Wattol finally did so, he launched himself at the other, catching him just below the midriff. They fell heavily, and a long curved knife went spinning. Distant lamplight slanted onto their faces as they grappled together.

" Wait !" the attacker exclaimed. " You're the gambler, aren't you ? Weren't you at Farribidouchi's joint earlier, playing on the central tables ?"

" Is this a time for conversation, you cheap quaint ?"

" You're the gambler, aren't you ? A thousand apologies, sir ! I mistook you for an ordinary loafer."

They scrambled up, the attacker full of contrite and flattering phrases. His name, he declared, was Jicksa, and he humbly offered Wattol a drink to compensate for his deplorable conduct. The dark, he swore, had driven him to a foolish act.

" I like all this no better than your earlier behaviour," Wattol said. " The truth is, I want nothing to do with you. Be off and leave me alone in meditation, you squirt."

" I've an offer to make you. A good offer. Look, we nals must stick together ; that's the truth, isn't it ? Stomin is a fearful place to be on. Because it happens to be a main conjunction of several important space routes, it swarms with all sorts of riff raff—"

" Like yourself !"

" Sir, I'm only temporarily down on my luck, just as you obviously are. Together we will re-establish our fortunes. I, you see, happen to be a gambler too."

" You might have said that in the first place, and saved yourself a lot of energy," Wattol said, beating dust and old fish scales from his clothing. " Let's go and get that drink. You can pay for it and tell me what your offer is."

They found a place called ' The Parakeet.' It stank but was comfortable. None of the other life forms present were too revolting in appearance. Settling into a corner with their glasses, the two nals were soon immersed in a discussion of various games of chance.

" I was fleeced when I was playing at Farribidouchi's. How comes it you have such an admiration for my playing ?" Wattol asked.

Jicksa smiled.

" The game was rigged, of course. I was watching but I daren't say anything, or I get my throat cut. It was a wonder you stayed in as long as you did. I figured we'd make a good pair when I saw the way you handled your cards."

" I certainly need the money. I've got a long way to get home—half the galaxy, no less."

" Where are you making for ?"

" Partussy itself. I am a Partussian citizen, if that's any honour nowadays. They've treated me as shabbily as if I was a member of a junior race."

" I certainly don't owe the authorities any love either," Jicksa admitted. " What happened to you, if it's not a long story ?"

" Until a few months ago, I was third Secretary of a Commission on a planet full of bipeds. A nice comfortable job, but I couldn't bear the way the Commissioner—a fellow called Par-Chavorlem—was treating the locals. He was a hateful swine. So I up and complained, and he threw me out on my ear. Didn't even give me the fare to get home with ; that's standard Foreign Department procedure, by the way.

" Well, I'd saved enough cash to buy a passage on a ship to Hoppaz II, and from there to Castacorze, which is a sector HQ planet. Castacorze is a foul dump, I tell you ! Like most HQ planets, it's rotten with graft, but the ordinary citizen can't swing a thing. I was stuck there for a year until I had earned enough money for a passage here. I even did manual labour to earn it."

Jicksa tut-tutted in sympathy.

" Yes, but at least I did two useful things on Castacorze. I resolved that after the way I'd been treated the world owed me a living ; from now on I'm going to rely on my luck and my wits to get me home to Partussy."

" At the rate you're going, friend, it'll take you twenty years. Stay here with me and fleece the tourists."

Wattol decided he did not much like Jicksa. The fellow seemed incapable of distinguishing between an ordinary crook and a man with extraordinary ambitions. Still, he would serve his purpose in the long game of leap frog that carried Wattol from planet to planet towards home.

Draining his glass, Jicksa signalled for another measure.

" What was this other useful thing you said you did on Castacorze ?" he enquired.

Wattol grinned a sour grin.

" You've probably never heard of Synvoret ? He's a big noise on the Supreme Council on Partussy. He always had a reputation in the Foreign Department for being one of the few incorruptible nals left ! So I got together a bundle of evidence against this Commissioner Par-Chavorlem and sent it off to Synvoret from Castacorze."

" What good will that do you ?" Jicksa asked.

" Some satisfactions can't be bought for money, brother Jicksa. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than seeing this louse Par-Chavorlem kicked out, and this planet he lords it over getting a square deal. And Synvoret's the nal to do it."

Jicksa sniffed. He had met sacked civil servants with crazy grievances before.

" What did you say the name of this planet was where you worked under Par-whoosit ?" he asked boredly.

" Oh, a backward little dump called Earth. I don't suppose you'd ever have heard of it ?"

Sipping his new drink, Jicksa agreed he had never heard of it.

one

The chair was very much in contrast to the coat that had been flung over it. Like the room in which it stood, the chair was large, over-ornate, and fearfully new.

The coat was simple in cut, worn, and old-fashioned. Made by a good Partussian tailor, it had the usual three bat-winged

sleeves with apertures below the arms, and a high collar reaching almost to the eyestalks such as was now worn only by members of the old school of diplomats. The edge of the collar was as frayed as the three wide cuffs. One of the octagonal fasteners down the front was a different colour from its six companions.

This was the coat of Signatory Arch-Hiscount Armajo Synvoret. Ten seconds after he had dropped it over his ornate chair, the cupboard extended a hook and drew the worn garment into its embrace. Tidiness is a virtue for underlings and machines.

Ignoring this, Synvoret continued to pace round his new room. His life had been austere, dedicated to the furtherance of Partussian justice on other worlds. This chamber, at once frivolous and ostentatious, seemed to him to embody principles he had often fought against. He resented being moved from his old quarters into it, for all its boasted advantages.

When his secretary entered bearing some mail, Synvoret took it abstractedly, asking " What do you think of this new roost for us ?"

".Why sir, admirable. Absolutely everything for our pleasure and comfort, isn't therc ?"

Synvoret nodded grimly. The young man had expressed a suitably young opinion. Pleasure and comfort : these were the touchstones of the time ; he was out of contact with current feeling—and relished being out of contact.

When the secretary had gone, Synvoret opened the first document he had been brought. Inside its foil cover was another cover, a dozen gaudy stamps on it indicating its hop-scotch passage from one port to another across the galaxy to its present destination. Its earliest stamp, marked ' Castacorze, Sector Vermilion ' bore a date almost two years old. With increased interest, Synvoret slit it open.

The envelope contained a number of flimsy documents and a covering letter which Synvoret read first.

To Supreme Council Signatory Arch-Hiscount Armajo Synvoret, G.L.L., I.L.U.S., L.G.U.S.S., P.F., R.O.R. (Omi), Fr.G.R.T.(P), Colony Worlds Council,
Partussy.
Sequestered and Honoured Signatory Sir,

Since my name will hardly have penetrated through the hierarchies and light years which divide us, permit me to introduce

myself. I am Wattol Forlie, one time Third Secretary to High Hiscount Chaverlem Par-Chavorlem, Galactic Commissioner to the planet Earth. To save your Signatoryship the annoyance of referring to files, let me add that Earth is a Class 5c World in System 5417 of Galactic Administration Sector Vermilion.

Good. I, Honoured Sir, have just been given the boot. I have not liked one single thing I have seen of the administration of this wretched planet Earth by our people. When I had the temerity to draft a minute to this effect to Commissioner Par-Chavorlem, I was brought before him and most unjustly given the push.

You as a veteran of ministerial life will probably know the terms of the standard galactic-colonial contract for Grade Four rankers in the Colonial Service like me ; by ' infringing ' it, I have to find my own way home. With ten thousand light years to Partussy, I doubt if I shall see home again before I'm an old nal. An effective way of keeping anyone quiet, eh ?

However, Honoured Sir, my main gripe is not for myself but for the subject race of Earth, termed ' terrestrials.' When and if you get to know them, these terrestrials are pretty good creatures, sharing many of a nal's better characteristics. The fact that they are biped has told against them historically—as it seems to have done against biped races everywhere.

My case is that these bipeds are being systematically exploited and ruined by our Earth Commission ; Par-Chavorlem is greatly overstepping his lawful powers, as I hope the enclosed documents will prove to you. If his rule continues, all Earth culture will be obliterated in another generation.

Par-Chavorlem should be stopped. A just nal should be put in his place, if just nals can still be found. Our mighty, glorious empire stinks to heaven ! It is rotten, decadent, through and through. If this dossier ever reaches you, I dare say you will do nothing about it.

Why do I write to you in particular, Honoured Sir ? Obviously I had to write to one of the signatories of the Colony Council ; they are the boys with the power to do things. I chose you because I learnt that in your youth you held, among other posts, the position of Deputy Commissioner to Starjj, another planet in this sector (Vermilion), where your rule was a pattern for enlightened justice. You still have the reputation, I believe, for being honest and perceptive.

If this is so, I beg you to do something for the terrestrials, and post this nal Par-Chavorlem somewhere where he can do no

further harm. Or most probably you are too busy to trouble with this whole matter. This is the age of the Busy Nal !

Your ex-servant in despair,
I am, Honoured Signatory Sir,
Wattol ' Big Head ' Forlie.

The comb on Signatory Synvoret's leathery old head rippled in anger, an anger by no means directed entirely against Wattol Forlie. The Colonial Office, under a succession of inept Ministers, had in his view grown increasingly incompetent to manage its own affairs. As the years descended on his shoulders, Synvoret grew increasingly sure that things were nowhere what they had been in his young day. Forlie's letter seemed to confirm this.

He went over to the ornate chair, sat on it, and spread Forlie's dossier on the desk. Its contents were the sort of documents he had expected to find.

Copies of directives signed by Par-Chavorlem for internal circulation in the Commision, imposing racial restrictions.

Copies of an order to the military authorising them to shoot on sight any terrestrian found within half a mile of any main road.

Copies of instructions to terrestrial authorities, inviting them to hand over art treasures to the Partussian authorities for ' permanent safe keeping ' against worthless guarantees.

Reports from Sub-Commission stations on Earth, giving details of forced terrestrial labour gangs employed there.

And copies of several arrangements with civilian contractors, mining firms, managers of space lines, and military governors (one of the latter a Star General on Castacorze), all showing items and expenditures well above anything prescribed for a 5c Commission.

It did, on the face of it, look like a major case of graft. The documents, most of which were photostats, built a sketch of systematic enslavement and robbery of the local population. The Signatory had in his time inspected such documents before. The Partussian empire was far-flung ; plenty of room existed in it for abuses. Corruption did flourish, however determinedly it was stamped on.

At the same time, and perhaps as frequently, disgruntled employees tried to ruin the bosses they imagined had ruined them.

Synvoret preserved an open mind. His brain was as cold as an old trout's. Rising, he walked over to the window, depaqued it, and gazed out at the forest of pinnacles which formed part of the biggest city in the galaxy and the Queen City. By craning his eye stalks, he could just see the sky ; up there was Partussy's real estate—four million worlds of it. It was a sobering thought ; no nal—no committee—no computer—could know a billionth part of what went on there.

Without bothering to turn round, he rang the radio bell on his wrist. The young secretary appeared almost at once, smiling, flattening his comb. Perhaps Forlie was just another such upstart as this.

" What is my first item on today's programme ?" Synvoret asked.

The secretary told him.

" Cancel it, please. I want you instead to check through to Central Records and get me all available date on Planet Earth of System 5417 GAS Vermilion, and on High Hiscount Chaverlem Par-Chavorlem, commissioner of that planet. And get me an appointment for tomorrow with the Supreme Councillor."

The Supreme Councillor's Ordinary Audience Room was tucked away in the centre of the same vast new block as was Synvoret's office. When Synvoret presented himself there, he felt relief to find the Councillor, an old nal called Graylix, alone with a robot recorder.

" Come in, Armajo Synvoret," he said welcomingly, rising to his three feet. " It is too long since we met informally."

" I warn you that I have a formal request to make you, Supremo," Synvoret said, briefly interlocking an eyestalk with his superior. " When my office made this appointment, I believe they sent you copies of certain documents ?"

Graylex indicated a pile of blue flimsies on the table.

" You refer to the Forlie dossier ? I have it here. Take a seat and we will discuss it, if you so wish. It seems a matter more for Psycho-Watch's Misdemeanor Branch than for us, don't you think ?"

" No, Supremo, I don't. I came here to ask you to permit me to go to Earth."

The Supremo had sat down. Now he apruptly rose again.

" You wish to go to Earth ? Why ? To investigate the state of affairs there as reported by this sacked Third Secretary?

You know as well as I do this evidence is probably false. How often have we not heard just such trumped-up charges from subordinates dismissed for some gross inefficiencies ?"

Unmoved, Synvoret nodded.

" Perfectly true. All Forlie has sent us is documentary evidence, and modern forgery methods being what they are, we no longer trust documentary evidence. Worse, these only purport to be photostat copies. For all that, I feel challenged, and must request permission to travel to Earth to investigate affairs there."

" That can of course be done . . . In fact, it is easy. You would simply be given instructions to take a small Official Investigation Team to Earth."

" Then you will grant me facilities ?"

The Supremo's comb made a non-committal gesture.

" Officially, I suppose I can't refuse you : reports of corruption must be confirmed or denied. Privately, however, I would like to remind you of a few facts. You are one of our most valued signatories. In your youth you saw active service in unpleasant fringe sectors like Vermilion. You have personal experience of a dozen Commissions. You're a tough old man, Armajo Synvoret—"

Signatory Synvoret broke in with an embarrassed laugh, but his superior continued.

"—but you are old, and you must realise you are old, even as I am. Now you propose to visit some snivelling little mote of a planet two years warp travel away. Four years you will be gone, four years at least, merely to gratify the whim of a moment. If you want a holiday, then by all means take a decent leave—"

" I want to go to Earth," the Signatory said, his comb stirring.

He took a turn about the long room, tugging at his arm flaps.

" We may be growing old nals, Supremo, but at least we're the real thing. The honour of the Empire rests with us. You know how these reports of corruption come in from time to time. It's about time someone responsible investigated them in person, instead of delegating authority to some Band of Hope Investigatory Mission which gets bribed on the spot and comes back reporting all's well. I cannot be bribed ; I'm too pig-headed—and too rich. Let me go ! If as you say it's the whim of a moment, then indulge me."

He stopped, aware that he had been speaking more harshly than he intended ; the remark about his being old had sunk in. The Supremo was smiling gently. That too irritated Synvoret; he hated being appeased.

" What are you thinking ?" he asked.

The Supremo did not answer the question directly.

" When I received this Forlie dossier, I naturally checked with Central on this man. He is very young : fifty-six. He left Partussy for Earth with four thousand *byaksis* gambling debts."

" I also checked Central. Gambling debts make no nal a liar, Supremo."

The Supremo bowed his head.

" Yet Par-Chavorlem's record is clean enough."

" He is far enough away for any dirt not to be noticeable at this distance," Synvoret said dryly.

" So. Obviously, you are determined to go, Armajo. Well, you have all my admiration, though little of my envy. This oxygen-enfolded ball Earth sounds less attractive. Get your secretary to attend Sessions tomorrow, and I'll submit you a draft list of Team applicants."

" I will keep the numbers to a minimum," Synvoret promised rising. He would have a lot to attend to before leaving Partussy.

" And remember, Armajo Synvoret, that Commissioner Par-Chavorlem must be officially notified of your intended inspection."

" I would prefer to drop in on him unexpectedly !"

" Naturally, but Protocol demands prior notification."

" So much the worse for protocol, Supremo."

When Synvoret was at the door, Graylix stopped him.

" Tell me, what really makes you suddenly so keen to venture on this quixotic errand to the other side of the galaxy ? What, after all, is the future of one little planet out of four million to you ?"

Synvoret raised his three arms in the nal equivalent of a wry smile.

" As you took care to point out, Supremo, I grow old. Perhaps justice has become a hobby with me."

He left. Back in his own quarters, he immediately drafted a signal.

To Colony Worlds Commissioner High Hiscount Chaverlem Par-Chavorlem, I.L.U.S., L.G.V.S., M.G.C.C., R.O.R. (Smi) Earth,
System 5417, GAS Vermilion.

Commissioner Sir,

You are hereby notified to hold yourself and your detail in readiness for my official and free-roving inspection of the planet Earth under your jurisdiction. I expect no special preparations for my visit. I do not give press interviews or attend cocktail parties or receptions other than requisite established minimum. No special demonstrations or appropriations need to be made in my honour. All I shall require are facilities for unescorted travel and interpreter speaking Earthian language.

Exact date of arrival follows.

Synvoret.

two

Partussian jurisdiction over its mighty empire was strict but impartial. The nals governed their subordinate worlds by slide rule rather than emotion. Earth to them—at least to those far away on the Queen World of Partussy—was simply a 5-c globe ; this was an economic classification, the 5 standing for ' Natural Products,' the ' c ' indicating an oxygen-nitrogen world.

The natural products were many, but in particular it was timber—timber tended and harvested by Earth men—that Earth exported.

Earth, in this its two thousandth year of Partussian domination, was covered in woods and forests, forests for the most part as neatly organised as factories. Some areas were not worth mass-production methods of afforestation, some had been given over to the rearing of *afrizzian* cattle. Here and there stood the old independant Earth cities and villages, some still partially occupied, some falling to ruins in forest clearings.

Everywhere ran the roads, good Partussian roads of vacuumised velcan, protected for every mile of their length by force fields. Before all else the Partussians were transporters, circulators. The road was virtually their symbol ; because they had been the first species to establish regular space routes, theirs was the biggest interplanetary empire.

One of these mighty roads ran across Europe Division, across the fertile Channel valley, to Greatbrit Division, where

it swept into the ramparts of Commission City, chief nal centre on the planet.

Here, ensconced in his own official rooms in the palace, Commissioner High Hiscount Par-Chavorlem was reading a blue flimsy just delivered to him. He scanned it through twice before handing it to his companion, Arm Marshall Terekomy.

" This Synvoret sounds quite a bastard," he remarked.

" We've handled bastards before," Terekomy said.

" Yes, and we can handle Synvoret and his team. Big brass back home invariably turns into small fry when it reaches the fringes. Anyhow, it's splendid the way Colonial Service etiquette demands the early announcement of visitors. It gives us time to prepare . . ."

He glanced at the date stamp on the letter.

" The fast warp ships won't get Synvoret here much before two years objective time are up. So we've got that long to ensure that he sees only what we want him to see."

" Fine ; we'll show him Earth's the best-run planet in the sector," Terekomy said, sarcastically. " What worries me is why he's coming at all."

" Perhaps he's heard a rumour."

" Such as ?"

" Such as the fact that the armed forces under you exceed by a factor of three the stipulated strength."

" Or that you draw your own modest revenue off every spaceship that lands here."

" Or that you personally pocket two *byaksis* for every tree we export."

" Or that—"

" All right, Terekomy, we know where we stand. The point is that Partussy is no longer minding its own business. We have to be on our toes to frustrate their interference *from today*, confound them. Synvoret must see just what we want him to see and no more. Ring for a survey ship, will you ? I think we'll start work right now by making a reconnaissance of the region. It must be all of three local years since I left Commission City."

The ship had arrived by the time they gained the top of the building ; it bore the two Partussians up through the enclosing force fields above the Commission, into the unbreathable atmosphere of Earth.

The Partussy Commission covered nine square miles of territory. Radiating from it along the three points of the

Partussian compass were the wide roads enclosed with force fields ; since the average nal weighed about a ton, land was generally preferred to air transport.

When an exploring scout of the mighty and ever-expanding Partussy Galactic Empire had first discovered Earth, some two thousand years ago, the inhabitants of that insignificant planet had been delighted to enter the Empire as fledgling members. The standard Protege Charter had been signed.

At once, the advantages of Partussy's colossal material and technological superiority had been felt. Fabulous aid programmes sprang up all over the planet. Vast loans were floated. Development schemes were launched daily. Thousands of far-sighted tripeds poured into Earth via the hastily-built space-ports, bringing with them their ideas, their money and their families.

Earth hummed with activity.

" A new renaissance !" the optimists exclaimed, echoing Partussy propaganda.

The wonderful new roads, slashing regardlessly over terrestrial highways, were soon constructed. Enclosed in their force fields, weather-proof and air-conditioned, they were the wonder of all Earth—even when it was discovered that they were intended for Partussian traffic only.

As, one by one, and each according to schedule, the astounding new schemes came to fruition, it dawned upon terrestrials that the Partussy-Earth Co-Prosperity Sphere was just a mockery, its advantages operating only in one direction. Men were not even allowed to leave their own system, except to visit a few specified frontier worlds as semi-slave labour.

When this realisation came, it was already too late to do anything effective. Perhaps it had always been too late ; Partussy had over two million years of history behind it, and four million planets under its sway. Its diplomatic corps were astute men who did not budge an inch under the growing chorus of terrestrial protest. They behaved with that cruelly unwavering patience displayed by the keepers of mentally deficient children. If they were unfair it was legally so. Commissioner after Commissioner coped gently with the obstreperous bipeds, striving to maintain goodwill where little cause for it existed.

Par-Chavorlem had changed all that. Taking up the post of Commissioner to Earth twenty-three years ago, he had instituted

a system of graft that made him one of the most powerful, most hated, nals in GAS Vermilion—a region embracing six thousand stars.

As he rode with his Arm Marshall now, high above the plains of Earth, he could see occasional burnt fields of grain and shattered forests marring the orderly landscape. These were the results of guerilla activity which had broken out in protest against his extortions. All over the globe, terrestrials were up in arms, fighting to destroy what would otherwise fall to the alien.

" The guerillas are not effective enough," Par-Chavorlem remarked, gazing down. " Before this inquisitive signatory arrives, we must damage our own plantations and burn arable land about the Commission. He should get the impression that these rabble biped bands are a serious revolt. We must portray ourselves as people beleaguered."

Marshall Terekomy agreed enthusiastically. " That would excuse the strength of our army here," he said. In his great cold tri-valve heart glowed respect for the Commissioner's lithe imagination. It spurred him to use his own.

" You know, we might even stage a little battle for our visitor," he said. " Let me think along those lines."

Below them slid a timber centre. A line of heavy transporters moved away from it towards the nearest space port. Par-Chavorlem's extortion methods were beautifully simple in the main. Using as pretext the theory that a crowd of men might turn into a revolutionary mob, he had issued an edict twenty years ago limiting the number of men who might be employed by any one terrestrial boss. This sent a flock of cheap labour into the hands of nal bosses. The money so saved, netted by an Employee Tax, found its way to the Commissioner's personal pocket.

" Let us get back," Par-Chavorlem snarled. His moods could alter suddenly, his customary urbanity falling away into anger. He was displeased that this change had come to disturb his life. The plane dipped round, heading for the City. Terekomy waited tactfully before speaking again.

" We have spread ourselves in recent years, Chavorlem," he said. " We have been comfortable, despite the foulness of this planet. Even Commission City itself is twice as large as statutory requirements stipulate for a 5-c world. We can never justify that."

" Yes. You are correct. The base wallahs of Partussy expect us to live like pigs. The present city will have to be abandoned entirely and camouflaged against the prying eye of any signatory. We must build and occupy a temporary Commission of statutory size on a new site. We can then go back to normal when our Peeping Tom has gone."
Terekomy remained gazing thoughtfully at the hateful landscape drifting below. In his heart, however, blossomed once more the great admiration he felt for Commissioner Par-Chavorlem. Silently he thanked the Trinity that his lot had been cast here, to serve beside this born leader of men, rather than in the decadent heart of Empire.

Aloud, he said without emotion, " When we return, we will send for one of the terrestrial representatives—your interpreter Towler would do—and get him to suggest a suitable site for the new building."

Chief Interpreter Gary Towler was shopping. In the afternoons when he was not required to work or wait at Par-Chavorlem's palace, he liked to do his own shopping, little as this might seem pleasurable in the circumstances.

The native quarter of Commission City was, of course, enclosed under the one big force dome, so that its lanes were full of the same noxious mixture of hydrogen sulphide and other gases as the rest of the Partussy enclosure. The native quarter shops and flats had their own oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, and were entered by airlocks. To go shopping required an air suit—an indignity when on what was, nominally at least, one's own planet.

" I would like a pound and a half of that best shoulder bone cut, if you please," Towler said, pointing to a joint of *afrizzian* on the butcher's counter. Afrizzians were quick-breeding mammals imported from another planet in the sector ; large herds of them were at present being establised on Earth.

The butcher grunted, serving Towler without speaking. Terrestrials who actually came into contact with Partussians every day were despised even by terrestrials who earned their living in the Commissions by other means ; they in their turn were despised by the semi-voluntary labour gangs who were driven out of the Commission every night—who in turn were despised by the majority of terrestrials who would and sometimes did starve rather than deal with the aliens. A sort of scale of distrust divided the whole community.

Taking his grudgingly wrapped meat, Gary Towler clamped up the face-piece of his air suit and left the shop. The streets of the native quarter were almost deserted. They held no beauty ; nor were they interestingly ugly. They had been designed by a nal architect on Castacorze, Sector HQ planet, who had seen bipeds only on Sensecreens. His vision had materialised into a series of dog kennels. Yet Towler went his way rejoicing. Elizabeth should be waiting at his flat.

The block of flats in which Towler lived was small, three stories high only, entered or left by airlocks.

When he was through the double doors, he unclamped his face plate and hurried along the corridor, sorry that he could not comb his hair inside an air helmet. He opened the door of his three-room flat. She was there.

The glimpse-globe hung in the centre of the ceiling ; Elizabeth stood directly beneath it. That was the only place in the flat from which her expression could not be spied on. Towler's eyes lit at the sight of her, though he knew that his act of opening the door would click over a warning relay far away, so that now a nal—or even a man—would be bending over a screen, watching him come in, seeing what he carried, hearing what he said.

" It's good to see you, Elizabeth," he exclaimed, trying to thrust off self-consciousness, to forget the spy overhead.

" I shouldn't be here," she said. It was not a promising opening. She was twenty-four, slender, far too slender, her face spear-bright with its length, its keen blue eyes. She was not beautiful, but about all her features was a definition that gave her a quality more vivid than beauty.

" We can talk," he said gently. Living here alone, isolated, he had almost forgotten what it was to be gentle. Taking her hand, he led her to the small table.

Her every movement showed uncertainty. Only ten days ago she had been free, living far from the City, hardly seeing a nal from one month's end to the next. Her father was an *affrizian* canner in a small way of business. Then a fraud in his tax returns was detected ; for five years he had been paying Partussy less than—under Par-Chavorlem's regime—was legally its due. His cannery was appropriated, his only daughter, Elizabeth, taken to work in the offices of the Commission. There, scared and homesick, she had come under Towler's jurisdiction. Pity—and perhaps something more—compelled him to offer her what help he could.

" If we talk, can *they* not hear us ?" she asked.

" Every word uttered goes to a monitoring post in Police HQ," he said, " where it is recorded. But of course they do not expect us to love them. Since they already have the power of life and death over us, a few words on tape hardly make much difference what you say ; only be guarded."

She flinched from the resignation in his words. He too—he read it in her face—belonged to a world quite foreign to her. They could touch each other, but as yet there was no real contact.

" Well then," she said, " how long must I expect to be kept here ?"

It was his turn to flinch. He had worked here for ten years, ever since he was twenty, trapped on a charge even slighter than the one that had caught Elizabeth Fallodon. In all that time, he had never been out of Commission City ; the nals issued one-way tickets to their biped attendants.

Instead of answering her directly, he said, " You will find it is not so bad here. A lot of very pleasant men and women work for the Partussians—and most of the Partussians, once you become used to their frightful exteriors, are inoffensive. It's fortunate you were drafted to Interpretation Branch. We are really quite a community on our own."

" I like Peter Lardening," she said.

" He is a promising young man, Lardening . . ." As he spoke, aware of his own patronising tone, Towler felt his cheeks redden. Lardening was indeed the best of the younger interpreters. Also, he would be about Elizabeth's age. It was too early to feel jealous, Towler told himself. Elizabeth was a stranger ; for various reasons it was best she should remain a stranger.

" He seems very kind," Elizabeth said.

" He is very kind."

" And understanding."

" He is very understanding." Suddenly, he had lost the ability to make conversation. He wished to say, ' I am the Chief Interpreter ; I can help you most . . .'

It was almost with relief that he heard the communicator chirp, though at any other time it might have alarmed him. He smiled painfully as he turned from her.

" Hello," he said, going over to it. As his personal disc came within its search beam, so the screen lit. He recognised his

caller as a minor clerk at the palace, a man, his face long familiar to Towler, though they exchanged nothing more intimate than a meaningless ' good morning.' (Under the force fields, the mornings were not only everlastingly good, but entirely artificial—and geared to suit the twenty-six hour Partussian standard day).

" Will you hurry on over to the palace, Gary Towler. Urgent call out for you."

" I have one afternoon off a month," Towler said. " This is it. Won't this urgent call keep fresh until tomorrow ?"

" Commissioner himself's asking for you. Better hurry on over !"

" All right. I'll be there. Don't panic !"

As the screen died and Towler resignedly clamped his face plate shut again, Elizabeth stood, saying nervously " I suppose that's got nothing to do with my being here ?"

" Why should it have ?" he asked, slight nervousness making him irritable.

His joint of meat lay on the table. Picking it up, he took it through into the kitchen and dropped it into his deep-freeze. Then he showed her rather hurriedly out of the flat, taking her slender arm as he did so.

" I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

She smiled, so that for a moment it felt as if he were breathing real fresh air again.

three

Sixteen and a half minutes later, Chief Interpreter Gary Towler was bowing to Commissioner High Hiscount Par-Chavorlem. After all these years of service in the City, Towler still felt a shudder of ineradicable fear at the sight of a Partussian. Par-Chavorlem stood ten feet high. He was immensely solid. His great bulk was almost cylindrical, except for his arms and legs. A nal was like a cannister to which two three-armed starfish were joined, one at the base, forming legs, one midway up, forming arms.

Like the the rest of his kind, Par-Chavorlem was almost featureless. At the end of each broad arm were two flexible, opposed fingers, with retractable claws usually concealed. Near the top of his cylindrical body were three regularly spaced eye-stalks ; while on top of his ' head ' was the usual fleshy

comb. All his other features were concealed under the wide flaps of his arms ; his mouth, his olfactory nerves, his aural cavities, his reproductive organs. A nal was a secret creature whose exterior betrayed very little.

Only the often highly expressive comb on the head relieved an impression of functional brutality.

" Interpreter Towler," Par-Chavorlem said, speaking without preamble in his own tongue. " Our way of life here will be altered from now on. Trouble brews, my little biped friend. Here is what you must do . . ."

Some miles away, Arm Marshall Terekomy was peering at a distant tower that looked to him as grim and forbidding as the Commissioner looked to Towler.

" And you say the terrestrial rebel leader is in that tower ?" Terekomy asked casually.

" His lookouts are, sir, and he is most certainly camped beneath it. That was why I radioed asking you to come here as soon as possible."

The speaker was a Ballistics-Beadle Ibowitter, a nal new to Earth, commanding a team which manned the latest experimental field weapon, the stereosonus.

Terekomy was strangely calm.

" I see you were efficient, Ballistics-Beadle," he said.

" You'll find I do my very best, sir. I was posted here from Starjj, another biped world, sir, and there my reputation for efficiency was also high."

Still calm, Terekomy said " I have seen your career sheet."

Slightly flustered by his superior's lack of enthusiasm, Ibowitter continued.

" And so I radioed you, sir, thinking you'd like to be in at the kill. This terrestrial leader Rivars has been causing trouble for so long . . . I naturally thought that you . . ."

His voice trailed off as he saw the colour of Terekomy's comb.

" If I've said anything, sir . . ."

" Your career sheet," Terekomy remarked almost conversationally, " says that you were deported from Starjj because you murdered some two thousand bipeds in an experiment with this new weapon. On Starjj, from what I hear, the bipeds are treated a deal more leniently than they are here. There the rulers are enlightened ; here—thank Trinity !—we aren't.

" Nevertheless, if you start knocking off terrestrials with that infernal stereosonic weapon, I swear I will not merely deport you, I'll tear you in strips of blubber a millimetre thick."

" But, Arm Marshall sir, this Rivars—"

" Rivars gives us a little opposition. Without him we have no excuse for restrictive measures. He costs us a lot every year, so we curtail his activities as far as possible—he's clever, I give you that, and if he had an offensive weapon like this new gadget of yours, it would be a very different story. But as it is, to wipe out his forces would be sheer folly—especially at present."

Peering through his air helmet, Terekomy surveyed the broken terrain, the grey tower built of stone at a period long before the Empire had discovered Earth, and behind it the senseless, endless arrays of green foliage that flourished on this oxygen world. He sometimes had a cold fondness for this world ; it was where he could be of service to Par-Chavorlem. He felt no anger for Ibowitter ; only pleasure that he had stopped an unfortunate accident.

Ibowitter was apologising.

" It's a pity we can't wipe out bipeds altogether," he said.

" Keep a thought like that to yourself. You know they're worth money. Millions of *byaksis* are invested in a little planet like this. How would the refineries, the factory, the mills, the farms, all the rest of it, work without biped labour ? It would cost five times as much doing the job with robot labour."

" I have been briefed on the economic situation."

" Keep it in mind then."

Time to get back to the City and Par-Chavorlem, Terekomy thought. Here he was not at ease. From Ibowitter's hide-out, little was to be seen but that old tower and the silent greenery perpetually breathing in its toxic carbon dioxide. In that greenery hid bipeds, terrestrials. They could in theory be killed so easily. Yet always there was a reason—political, economic, personal, tactical—for not killing them. Perhaps they would at last survive to emerge from the greenery and take over again a world the nal had left. It was possible, for the bipeds admitted no compromise, whereas the Empire was founded on it.

Such thoughts made Terekomy gloomy.

" I did not mean to snap your head off, Ibowitter," he said. " I know you were doing what you thought was your duty, but

your orders were only to contain Rivars. The truth is, we cannot do without a single fighting biped against us. In two years' time, we're going to need them to show a certain visitor how vicious they are."

" Sir ?"

" Never mind ; I'm talking to myself. Carry on, Ibowitter."

" Wait, Arm Marshall. You mean a time might come when you want to stage a fight or something with more bipeds ?"

Terekomy continued to walk towards his car, which pointed sharply towards the City. He slowed his pace, otherwise revealing no interest.

" And what if so ?" he asked.

Ibowitter became confidential, seeing he had produced some reaction in the other.

" Just let me have a ship, sir, ex officio. We could always *import* a few thousand bipeds . . ."

"You know the transference of subject or colonial races from one planet to another is highly illegal," Terekomy said, keeping his voice detached so that the Ballistics-Beadle did not take fright.

" A lot of things take place that are illegal," Ibowitter said firmly. " Illegality can only be proved where the offence is detected. Now sir, I have some valuable contacts on Starjj . . ."

He paused and looked meaningly at Terekomy.

The latter said, " You have certain qualities that recommend you for promotion, Ibowitter. If the ability to keep quiet is among them, you may find yourself doing more interesting work in a few weeks. I will think of your suggestion, while you must forget it. Do these Starjj bipeds resemble Earth bipeds, by the way ?"

" Very closely, sir. In all but a few very minor details."

" Hm. Well, see that Rivars has undisturbed sleep tonight. That is all."

The automotor hummed him back down the fine road towards the palace. Terekomy was smiling under his arms. He thought he saw a way of helping the Commissioner ; but the scheme, he determined, should be entirely his own.

The road over which he sped was a thread on the globe over which Par-Chavorlem, some of his staff officers, and Towler poured. They were choosing a site for the temporary Commission City that was to be no bigger than regulations allowed. Several officers had made suggestions, pointing out various parts of the globe.

" No," said Par-Chavorlem at length, " I see no reason why we should unduly inconvenience ourselves by moving far from here, even for an inquisitive Signatory. Nor do we wish to lose contact with Rivars' army."

He indicated a point along the escarpment at the edge of the Channel Valley.

" What about here ? To the south of it was once a narrow and meaningless strip of sea ; one of my more imaginative predecessors drained it. It might be pleasant to have a city within sight of such an enterprise. And two roads meet conveniently. What more do we want ?"

Polite and deferential murmurs.

" There is a ruined city not far away which will not trouble us. Its name is Eastbon, I see. Do you know anything about Eastbon, Interpreter ?"

" It has some history in pre-Empire days," Towler said, speaking in Partussian.

" Right. Take a note. Translate it into terrestrial, get it up into Transmissions as soon as possible, see it is circulated to all native contractors concerned. Quote. Labour conscriptors and labourers are advised that work for four thousand hands will shortly become available in the region of Eastbon, convergence of Routes 2A and 43B. Tasks of up to a year's duration proposed. Standard contract all grades, less Native Improvement Levy. Unquote. Got that ?"

" Yes, sir," Towler said.

" Good. I thought from the air it looked excellent land. Your people should enjoy working there."

He turned back to his officers as Towler bowed at this pleasantry and headed for the Transmissions Room. So the Commissioner had not only been out of the palace ; he had taken to the air. It was almost unprecedented ! Although some of the details remained obscure, already it was clear that something of the utmost importance was brewing.

On his way through the palace, Towler met Peter Lardening, the young interpreter. He put his hand out as if to detain Towler.

" Oh, Interpreter Towler, forgive me, but about Elizabeth Fallodon—do you think—"

" I'm sorry ; I mustn't stop," Towler said.

Even Elizabeth and her affairs must wait now.

But as he hurried into the interpreters' off duty room to pick up an oxygen cylinder before returning home, Lardening followed him in. Several of the other interpreters were there, smoking and talking : Reonachi, Meller, Johns and Wedman. They greeted the Chief Interpreter cheerfully.

" Start hammering, boys," he said, nodding to them.

Grinning, they leant against the sides of the room and commenced to beat them with palms or fists. The spy system in the City being what it was, they did not doubt that this room was wired ; consequently when they had anything important to say they beat the walls to set up vibrations which would baffle any concealed microphones. It was one way of annoying their conquerors.

" We're going to be moved out of this City, at least for a while," Towler said, speaking through the din. " Someone's evidently got news of what goes on here through to Partussy and we're going to be investigated. Chav is obviously unsettled. All of you keep your ears open and pass on any details."

They cheered louder than they knocked, and then beseiged him with questions.

As soon as he was free to leave, Towler hurried back to his flat. He did not bother to remove his air suit. After busying himself in the kitchen for some minutes, ignoring the unsleeping eye of the glimpse-globe, he took the meat he had purchased earlier back to the butcher. The butcher, who was about to close, eyed him suspiciously.

" I dislike complaining, but this cut is not of the freshest, butcher," Towler said. " I wish to return it."

After some haggling, the butcher took the cut back, threw it under the counter, and gave the interpreter another one. When his shop had closed, he wandered casually over to the counter and picked up the offending meat. His probing fingers soon discovered the plastic chip Towler had inserted in it. The chip would contain a message. Tomorrow morning early, the chip would pass to a refuse man whose job necessitated his leaving the City daily. From him, the chip would soon pass to the patriots' stronghold in the hills, and direct into the hands of Rivars.

Within twenty-four hours of its arrival on Earth, the preliminary announcement of Signatory Synvoret's proposed visit was causing a stir everywhere.

four

The next two years objective time were crowded ones. As the Signatory made his long journey, stage by stage towards Earth, the various factions on that planet—each in its different way—prepared to receive him.

For Synvoret and his party, the subjective time of the voyage was only four months. And at least half of that period was passed at spaceport hotels dotted across the universe, waiting to catch a connection headed in their desired direction. Even with a high priority ticket, it took the party five hops to reach Earth.

At the end of the fourth hop, grounded on a planet named Appelobetnees III, Synvoret was lucky. He was due to catch an Official Lines ship in two days which would take him to Earth via Castacorze. Then he learnt of a warp freighter leaving for Partussy via Saturn—Saturn with its rings was a popular scientific curiosity for the day, and the freighter had laboratory equipment to ship there.

Synvoret summoned the freighter captain and quickly made his arrangements.

" Sure, I can put your party off on Earth and collect you on the way back from Saturn," the captain said. He was a much whiskered creature, tall as a nal, shaped like a shrimp. " Since we shall be in ordinary space for most of that inter-system hop, you should get eight or nine clear days on Earth. After which I will have you back in Partussy in eight weeks subjective time."

" Excellent," Synvoret said.

" Get aboard the *Geboraa* this evening, and we clear Appelobetnees III at ten chimes tomorrow."

" Excellent," Synvoret said again.

Before informing the rest of his party of this change of plans, he took a reflective turn round the Space port.

It disturbed him to find how relieved he was to have a way home planned before he had reached his destination. Although he solaced his conscience by telling himself that nine days was ample to prove or disprove Par-Chavorlem's guilt, he could not so easily forget that only a short while ago he had been promising himself the longest possible time away from home.

" I'm getting old, missing my own hearth," he muttered—and by admitting it to himself jokingly, he was able to ignore it and its significance.

Relieved, he began to go back to the hotel, simply reversing to do so like a locomotive, instead of actually turning round like a man. As he skirted the space port barrier, a nal outside called to him. Swivelling an eyestalk, Synvoret saw a ragged fellow detach himself from the multi-shaped crowd of passers-by and come up to the fence, obviously attracted by the signatorial uniform. Synvoret halted agreeably.

" You have the bearing of a civilized nal," the ragged one said through the fence. " I'd lay ten to one you'll be off this accursed planet within a matter of hours. In the diplomatic service, sir, are you not ? So was I once ; now by a turn of fortune's wheel I rot on this rain-drenched mud ball."

" Out of work, eh ?" Synvoret enquired guardedly, not keen to hear a long hard luck story.

" Not through my own fault, sir. Nor is it my fault I'm fleeced of every *byaksis* I need to get away from this dump. I beg you, spare me nine tens."

Synvoret could be generous enough when the gift ensured the disappearance of an unwanted recipient.

" Here you are," he said, holding out the small coins. " But why ask for nine tens, instead of a whole hundred ?"

The ragged nal raised his arms in the Partussian smile.

" I'm a gambler, sir. I'm gambling my way home across the universe. Nine tens happens to be the exact price of one Appelobetneesian lottery ticket. That's what I need ! The prize money's almost enough to take me all the way to Partussy, and the odds of winning are said to be ninety-six million to one."

" It's not a chance I'd throw away nine tens on," Synvoret said.

" Ninety-six million happens to be my lucky number," the tattered nal said, rippling his comb and merging back into the crowd.

Shaking his head—partly with pleasure—at the foolishness of nal, Synvoret returned to tell his retinue of their new departure time. Twenty hours later, they were in deep warp, boring for Earth.

On Earth, the interested parties were ready for him—just.

So cunning and determined was the armed opposition of the patriots under Rivars, that commencement of work on the new City at Eastbon was postponed for some weeks until Arm Marshall Terekomy's ground forces—hampered by orders to

spill human blood as sparingly as possible—had performed mopping up operations. The new City began to rise, its modest volume calculated not to offend the tape measures of any suspicious investigators.

Then the native labour gangs engaged in its construction became difficult. A ' go slow ' policy lasted for three days—lasted, in fact, until twelve bipeds taken at random were publicly disintegrated by stereosonus. Again the work proceeded slowly, and at last it was done. The first step to deceive Synvoret had been taken.

By leaving a strong rear party in the old City, which was now concealed from every eye behind negavision screens, Par-Chavorlem was able to bring the establishment he installed in the new City within the officially stipulated maximum numbers.

Terekomy had pressed energetically ahead with his no less sizeable task, which he still managed to keep secret from his superior. Ballistics-Beadle Ibowitter came to report the completion of his part of the scheme, tapping a map importantly against his flank as he entered Police HQ.

Presenting the map to Terekomy, he indicated two shaded areas on it.

" Here is where we believe the main body of Rivars' rebels to be concentrated, sir," he said, " And just *here* I have personally seen to the disposition of five thousand Starjjans, male and female—these bipeds have but two sexes, as you know, sir. They are in well covered ground, with ample opportunities for defence and attack."

Terekomy was suddenly gloomy. With a flash of insight, he saw how a wish to please Par-Chavorlem had led him into a delicate position ; to present his superior with this dangerous *fait accompli* might well bring him anger rather than congratulation.

"How did you get them off Starjj? Are you sure you weren't seen ?"

" Absolutely, sir. I took three ships. We landed on the night side and removed all the adult inhabitants of one hill town. They were somnalized. The whole thing went without hitch. I count it as my most successful operation to date."

Terekomy flapped his comb contemptuously.

" You should have brought me one of these alien bipeds to examine. How nearly do they resemble terrestrial bipeds ?"

" As I told you when we first discussed this matter, Arm Marshall sir, very nearly. The differences are almost negligible. They possess a vestigial tail, webbed feet—aquatic origins, sir —and some slight modification in the sexual organs which need worry nobody. Any other questions, sir ?"

At his unctuous mixture of insolence and servility, Terekomy allowed the inside of his comb to turn a faint viridian.

" You know why we've got these infernal creatures here, Ibowitter. To stage a good show for this visiting brass hat, to convince him Earth needs to be repressed by force. What makes you think they and the terrestrials will fight ?"

The Ballistics man raised an arm in the gentlest irony. He was a civilized nal, and had read much of the history of the two species he exterminated so efficiently.

" Your answer, sir, like most answers to most questions, lies in past history. One group of bipeds will fight any other group of bipeds. They have this natural law which is called, I believe, the Survival of the Fiercest."

" Dismiss, Ibowitter. Your services will be suitably rewarded ; I know an aspiring nal when I see one."

Somewhat hurt by this abruptness, Ibowitter left the room, proceeded down the corridor, descended by the lift, turned towards the narrow front doors of the Police building. Before he reached them, three burly nals seized him, one by each arm, removing him despite his protests to a subterranean cell. Next day his unfortunate death in a street accident was announced.

Directly after his final interview with Ibowitter, Terekomy went to Par Chavorlem to announce, with the boldest face he could muster, his Starjjan scheme.

Par-Chavorlem received the news with mild interest. He was feeling highly pleased with himself ; he was positively looking forward to Synvoret's arrival on the morrow ; he was relishing the art that had been lavished on the deception of this one nal. The truth was, Par-Chavorlem was an able administrator gone wrong ; the desire and the capacity to regulate turns easily into a compulsion to manipulate. Pulling strings was Par-Chavorlem's joy ; exploiting his victims but a by-product of that pleasure.

" These Starjjans," he said judiciously. " You are running a risk taking them off their native planet. Our History of Empire over the last million years shows the danger of allowing two subject races even the remotest chance of uniting together.

Very strict laws have been framed to guard against this eventuality. If your ingenious move were ever discovered by the wrong person—Synvoret, let's say—I doubt if even our well-bribed friends on Castacorze could help us out."

Terekomy disliked hearing his own arguments brought against him.

" Nobody will find out. We came and went secretly. As for Starjjan and terrestrial uniting ! These imported wretches are on an alien planet, speaking an alien tongue. They will not be in diplomatic mood—nor will Rivars. To him they will be invaders to be exterminated.

" I've seen to it that the Starjjans have been equipped with strong enough weapons to ensure that although their eventual defeat is inevitable, it will be protracted enough to give our visiting signatory and his boys the impression that a first class civil war is raging here."

" You have contrived well," Par-Chavorlem said.

Terekomy's comb flushed with pleasure.

On what might be termed the domestic front, several significant changes had been made. Gary Towler found his interpreter's salary increased, as well as his off duty hours. He observed that Par-Chavorlem made an obvious effort to be more polite to him when they met—even to the point where other men working about Commission City muttered of favouritism.

Towler bore it as well as possible. Against his growing unpopularity among the other interpreters he tried to set the unexpected advantages of living in the new City. Forced to curtail some of his more obviously sinister activities for the time, Par-Chavorlem had unwillingly given more freedom to the bipeds who worked in the City.

But nothing compensated for the growing coldness Elizabeth Fallodon showed Towler. In the past two years she had become resigned to her work and was even gay. She had put on weight, grown beautiful. In Towler's rather isolated life, she was the brightest thing. He shivered now to think she might try to avoid him.

On the eve of Synvoret's arrival, Towler returned early to his flat — a replica of his old one in the other temporarily abandoned city. He had ceased to do his own shopping for dislike of being snubbed in the street. His supplies were now delivered to the flat.

He sat down to a solitary meal with much appetite. When he cut open his meat pie, he found a plastic chip in it. Turning pale, he wiped it on his napkin and opened it.

The message was concise. It said he was to present himself at the butcher's shop at 1955 hours that evening, just before closing. Arrangements were made for him to be smuggled out of the Commission for a ' personal conference ' at the patriots ' stronghold. He would be delivered safely back to the City before dawn to resume duties. The note was signed ' Rivars ' —the now almost legendary name of the patriot leader.

Towler could eat no pie. His stomach jumped nervously as he destroyed the message. Fluttering round the room, he tried to regain control of himself; nevertheless, the idea of not obeying did not enter his head. He knew the future of Earth might well rest in his reluctant hands.

When his doorbell buzzed, he went towards it trembling. He was expecting nobody . . .

It was Elizabeth. This was beauty to him, this dear narrow face, with its gently long nose and a mouth in contrast; not cruel, but predatory, demanding; and mouth and nose combining with her bright eyes to produce—so better than conventional prettiness, he cried inwardly !—a unique, an individual countenance. He flattered himself to think that few could recognise as he did her special loveliness. The two years she had spent in Commission service had matured rather than crushed her.

"What could be nicer than this?" he exclaimed. "Elizabeth, come in. It's too long since you've been here."

" Five days," she said, smiling. He saw at once she was wary.

" Five days is far too long. Elizabeth, when I hear you at work having to talk in the cold hard language of our conquerors, you seem like another person—just as I'm another person when I'm with you. You must know how I—"

There was a tawny light in her eyes now. The shades in them changed with every mood.

" Please, Gary, don't say any more just now," she begged, breaking into his speech. " It only makes what I have to say more difficult." She paused, glancing up at the ceiling.

" Go ahead, go and say what you want," he said almost roughly. " There are no private glimpse-globes in this new city, no spy system that we know of. Say anything !"

" I only wanted to say that we ought not to meet privately any more. Thank you for the coaching in Partussian you've given me . . ."

" Why's this ? Why so sudden ?"

" For no reason . . . I just feel our interests are very different, that's all."

Towler was not one to persist or persuade ; he could only acquiesce. Suddenly he wanted to be away, to save her having to deliver these little speeches which surely hurt her. He looked at her and his attitude minutely altered—why should he hide his feelings ?

" Such as our interest in Peter Lardening ?" he asked.

" How unlike you to say that !" She was stung.

" How do you know what's like or unlike me ? Listen, Elizabeth, even when we're close together there is a barrier between us, isn't there ? Well, it isn't my fault—I mean, the barrier is removable. You see I'm always under a certain strain—you'd better know—I'm an agent for Rivars, passing information from the palace. I'm living constantly out on a limb."

He had not meant to tell her. His mind instantly went off in circles of recrimination, returning only partly to hear her say, " That alters so much for me. It's been difficult, Gary—"

Suddenly he caught hold of her, almost roughly swinging her towards him. At that she stopped talking ; anger kindled in her eyes as she pulled her arm away.

"You look just fine like that!" Towler exclaimed. "Elizabeth, why should I be afraid to speak out to you ? You are very dear to me, partly because you often behave as I do—"

" Oh, do I ? How exactly.?"

" How ? You were planning to make a break with me because you've listened to the other interpreters instead of following your own instinct. You thought—I was Chav's toady, didn't you ? I don't *blame* you, Elizabeth, but you were thinking conventionally, just as I often do. We're both conventional people, caught now in an unconventional situation, and we must try to overcome it."

" Gary—you're so . . . diffident." Her chin was still pugnacious. " Yes, I do like you : you've helped me so much, but you ought to be more *defiant* . . ."

" Just try to understand, my dear, that both of us probably have a lot in our lives to work out. Your attraction is not only

that you are conventional, as I am, but that there's a tiger buried in you—as there is in me. That's what's between us. That's why—why we need each other badly."

As Towler hurried to the butcher's, he reflected with some wonder on what he had said to Elizabeth. It cost him great effort to speak his mind unhampered to anyone, particularly to a woman. Only to Elizabeth had he revealed the secret feeling that had long possessed him : that given the moment he could rise to it from his shell. Now it seemed the moment was at hand—and he trembled.

When he presented himself at the butcher's, he was unceremoniously bundled under a counter out of sight. There he stayed until the shop was closed and the shutters put up. The butcher helped him to his feet.

" To think that you'll be speaking with Rivars in a couple of hours," he exclaimed. " The other city was too well rigged with spy devices for anyone to slip in and out, but here it's another matter—while it lasts. It's a golden opportunity for you. I wish I were you."

Overawed by the thought of his mission, Towler merely grunted. The butcher, misinterpreting, thought he was being aloof.

" I am sorry we always have to treat you like an outcast, sir," he said, brushing Towler down apologetically. " It breaks my heart having to be discourteous to you, respecting you as I do. But orders are orders, and we never know who may be watching, do we, even in this city ? You're a real hero, Gary Towler sir, and it's a pleasure to know you. Now if you'd just step into this refuse bin . . ."

Clamping up the face plate of his suit, Towler crouched uncomfortably in the bin, suffering a sack to be placed over his shoulders and rubbish to be poured on top of it. After only a brief wait, a disposal cart arrived at the back door, and Towler's bin was dumped unceremoniously on it. For half an hour they lumbered through the streets collecting other refuse.

Finally they arrived at the ' gate.' Partussy sentries clumped round the cart, cursorily inspecting and passing it. A neutraliser was switched on, the force field died locally and they passed into the airlock tunnel. Two minutes later, they were in the fresh Earth air with darkness round them : not that the air in the dustbin partook of that freshness.

At the tip, half a mile down the road, Towler's bin was unloaded, the refuse man helping him out. Towler stretched gratefully, dwarfed by the bulk of the atomic disposer.

" Now mister, you better get yourself moving," the man advised. " The force fields are broken here while I dump my load. Behind this tip you'll find one solitary tree. It marks the beginning of a path that'll take you into the beginning of Channel territory. Keep on down it fast as you can and someone will meet you. His challenge will be " Dry bread " and your answer will be " Hot ice." Got that ? Okay then, off you go and all the best !"

Darkness was almost entire. The ill-defined path was not easily kept to. Towler did his best, a dizziness compiled of apprehension and elation in his veins. The air, thick as cream, seemed to pour through the sluices of his being. He was in the open for the first time for ten years. For the first time in ten years stars gleamed overhead—the force fields occulted them in the City. Perhaps one day . . .

The challenge was flung at him from the darkness.

" Dry bread !"

Startled, he gave the countersign and heard a safety catch click on.

A gaunt man appeared, little more than a dark outline against the lighter path. He beckoned Towler to follow almost without a word. They scrambled down a broken, chalky bank into a belt of high scrub, moving so fast and so far that Towler almost cried for respite. Shuddering for breath, sweating under the atmosphere suit he still wore, he emerged behind the guide into a stony clearing. Two horses waited with another mounted man.

They rode in an easterly direction for over an hour. Towler had never ridden an animal—had hardly seen one. Every minute was agony for him.

Their way was mainly downhill, through curiously broken territory. Once they passed by the fringe of a planted forest. When they trotted into a ravine, stopping before a row of huts sheltered under crumbling cliff, Towler dismounted stiffly and looked about.

Rivars' temporary headquarters consisted of little more than a few tents and huts, as far as could be seen. Advantage had been taken of the natural cover afforded by the ravine, but the threat of discovery by nal reconnaisance forces was compara-

tively slight. Their aversion to air travel limited the number of their aircraft sorties, while their faith in their impregnable roads tended to make them disregard the waste areas between.

Tethering the horses, Towler's guides led him into one of the huts. Food and drink awaited him here, and he set to with gratitude, removing the helmet of his suit.

He was still eating when Rivars entered.

five

In these recessional days for Earth, Rivars was perhaps the only terrestrial name known all over the globe. Other patriot leaders existed, scattered over the other continents, but none had ever survived before so close to the centre of nal rule. The very fact that Rivars pitted his wits and strength against the City itself had contributed to his power.

He was an average-sized man in his fifties, compactly built, well formed. In his full crop of black hair was one wide and startling skein of grey. He wore leather overalls, a long cloak, boots, and a round cloth hat. His eyes were steady and penetrating, their heavy lids giving him the hooded look of an eagle. Though he entered the hut without ceremony, the air of authority about him was such that Towler dropped his fork and rose.

Motioning him to sit again, Rivars took the chair beside him and faced him.

" I appreciate your coming, Towler," he said. " I am aware of the risks you take in being here, but a personal discussion is necessary between us, and fortunately the lack of police refinements in the new Commission make it possible."

Without further preface, he began to talk about the arrival of Signatory Synvoret, now only a few hours ahead.

" Your notes to us have kept us well informed of what happens at the palace, but I wish to see that I have the significance of this visit clear. First then, the Colony Worlds Council of Partussy expects the exploitation of subject planets like Earth, but this exploitation is rigorously limited by charter. Right ?"

" That is correct," Towler agreed. " Naturally they call it development rather than exploitation."

" And Par-Chavorlem is exceeding the exploitation limit and breaking his charter ?"

A tight, grim smile passed between them as Towler again said, " That is correct."

" Good. The benefits of this exploitation go into the pockets of Par-Chavorlem, his friends, and those contacts whose silence he finds it necessary to purchase. Right ?"

" Quite right."

" And this corruption must undoubtedly extend to his immediate superiors at GAS Vermilion HQ on Castacorze ?"

" We have no direct proof of this, sir, but it must be so. As you know, inspecting bodies from Castacorze have visited Earth from time to time, and nothing has changed. Someone powerful there must be bought, or Par-Chavorlem would have been out of office long ago."

Rivars sat silent a full minute, digesting this. Finally he said, " Since I am little more than a rebel captain, this question can be merely of academic interest. But why would you say such graft exists in the middle of an energetic empire ?"

It was not an easy question.

" It is hard to gather information about what happens elsewhere in the galaxy," Towler said. " But I think what is happening on Earth may be fairly typical of other so-called Colonial Planets. In essence, the vast Partussian administrative system is going soft. Although it's too early to say yet, it may be that the old Empire is entering its decadent stage."

" I see. If that were so, a few healthy insurrections on a dozen planets like Earth might hasten the decline ?"

" They might indeed, sir."

Rivars smiled the cold smile of a condor and said nothing. In his mind was a clear little picture of worlds exploding like bullets.

Unexpectedly, he reached out and snapped off the light. He walked towards the window, grunting to Towler to follow ; there, taking a torch from under his cloak, he shone it into the night.

The beam picked out the opposing cliff, creating it suddenly from the darkness in all its detail of embossed stone and hanging grass. At its top, a ragged spar projected almost vertically into the air.

" There's a symbol for you, Towler. That's the mast of an old ship. It must be twelve hundred years old at least. All this area used to be sea bed just a few centuries ago. That ship sunk through a series of accidents ; now it's been raised up

again through another series. The same thing will happen to Earth—and our job is to engineer the right accidents."

The demonstration was, Towler thought, ingenuous. Reproaching himself for lack of loyalty, he still could not see the need for it. He blinked embarrassedly as the light came on and they resumed their seats. As if to counter a weak moment of romanticism, Rivars' voice was matter-of-fact when he spoke again.

"Now to the main business of our discussion. First important question. The visit of this Signatory—Synvoret—is obviously vital to us all ; it may be the only time that someone with almost complete power, a member in fact of the Colony Worlds Council itself, comes personally to Earth within the next five centuries. Tell me—would it be possible for Par-Chavorlem to bribe Synvoret ?"

Towler hesitated. Rivars poured him some wine which he drank almost without noticing.

"You realise, sir," he said at length, "that if Synvoret discovers the true state of affairs on Earth—as he has every intention of doing—then Par-Chavorlem will be a broken man. The result will undoubtedly be justice and restitution for our people. I believe Synvoret—who is disinterested and has a high reputation—to be incorruptible ; and I believe Par-Chavorlem knows he is incorruptible—hence all the subterfuges he has been preparing for these past two years."

The patriot leader stood up, letting his chair fall backwards. Eyes gleaming, he took a turn about the hut. As he walked, he punched a fist into his other palm.

"Then we shall win through at last, Towler ! All our sacrifices will not have been in vain. If we cannot acquaint this honest man with the truth of our position, then we do not deserve the smell of freedom."

They had been in accord until now, two men filled with the same aspirations. The tensions of the night, the murmuring voices of the guards outside, the food cooling on the table—all these Towler had forgotten as he talked to this leader in whom everyone's faith was limitless. He had felt himself for once at the centre of things, near the core of truth.

Suddenly, Rivars' exultant words cracked Towler's faith from top to bottom. He found himself on the edge of an abyss of doubt. Only of one thing was he sure : Rivars was naive.

It was understandable enough. Rivars was a fighter, a leader. He knew the ways of soldiers and the tactics of generals. With the lie of the country and the taste of adversity he was more than familiar. But of the cunning of diplomats he comprehended nothing.

Towler had been forced to live among diplomats. He knew that bribery was only one weapon in Par-Chavorlem's arsenal. He guessed that the Commissioner would have a dozen ways of winning Synvoret's silence.

He rose to speak, to protest, to state what was on his mind. The leader clapped him on the shoulder and proposed a toast to forthcoming freedom, snatching up the wine as he did so.

" I will see that proof of corruption gets before Signatory Synvoret ! The way is clear !" he exclaimed. In that horrible moment, Towler saw that the future of Earth might rest not on Rivars' broad shoulders but on his own reluctant ones. Rivars just did not know what he was dealing with.

Turning his face away, he sipped the wine before finding the strength to say, " The situation may be more complex than you imagine, sir. In any case, whatever evidence we place in Synvoret's hands must be foolproof and tangible. Documents are hardly enough—they may convince Synvoret, but when taken half way across the galaxy they will not convince the Colony Council."

" I understand. We will deal with that in a moment," Rivars said, rather curtly.

Silence fell. They heard a man laugh some distance from the hut.

" My friend, you still have an important part to play in our affairs," Rivars said, glancing at his watch. " The time nears for you to ride back to the City, so I will be brief. I must tell you, as you may have suspected, that I have other sources of information than you close to Par-Chavorlem—although none so close or so valued as you. This is partly to ensure I am not left absolutely uninformed if anything happens to you, you understand."

In fact, Towler had guessed as much, although to have his guess confirmed piqued his pride ; it meant he was not quite as valuable as Rivars claimed. He said merely, " This is one of the advantages of having an enemy foolish and arrogant enough to refuse to learn their victim's language : it makes them dependent on a number of their victims."

Rivars laughed shortly, as if he had not considered that aspect before.

" My sources tell me," Rivars continued, " that the promotion and better treatment you have enjoyed recently is because Par-Chavorlem plans to use you as Synvoret's personal interpreter. He will not try to bribe Synvoret ; he will bribe *you*, to give Synvoret his version of the facts—on *you* will rest the onus of convincing Synvoret that all is well on Earth."

His heart sinking again, Towler said numbly, " I had almost suspected as much."

Rivars stared him straight in the eyes.

" Par-Chavorlem's offer to you will be considerable."

The interpreter kept his face wooden ; irritation filled him to think that this man who had unknowingly just failed his crucial test was now testing him. When the silence had extended itself until it seemed to fill all memory, he said, " I am an Earthman, leader. I know where my loyalties lie."

" We too have the power to make offers," Rivars said, speaking rather quickly. " If we manage our affairs properly in the next week, freedom lies ahead of us. Your services will not go forgotten, Towler. You shall have ten acres of land and a house built for you overlooking the sea. You will not have to work again, once we are free from this regime."

Again Towler felt exasperation, knowing that these promises only signified that Rivars was unsure of him, did not know how much to trust him. He stood up.

" Give me my instructions," he said harshly. " I will see they are carried out."

" Sit down with me, drink some more wine," Rivars said and, when they were seated, continued, " We must provide Synvoret with material proof of the true state of affairs here on Earth. As you say, copies of documents will mean little back on Partussy. The Signatory must take back with him some simple tangible, dramatic, piece of evidence to show conclusively that Par-Chavorlem is overstepping his powers here. If we can do just that, Earth should be freed from his tyranny."

Towler looked sceptical.

" What sort of evidence have you in mind ?"

He fancied that uncertainty flickered across the hard face opposite to him.

" I will find something," Rivars said smoothly, " and I will see that it reaches you within three days. Your part—your vital part—in this will be to present Synvoret with that evidence

when a suitable opportunity occurs. Until that opportunity occurs, in order to raise no suspicions, it is essential that you play the part Par-Chavorlem allots you ; afterwards, of course, you must answer straightly any questions the Signatory may ask you. Is this all clear, Gary Towler ?"

The interpreter looked down at his fingers. Suddenly he felt very tired.

" I will do as you instruct. You may depend on me."

Rivars rose and shook his hand.

" Earth depends on you," he said solemnly. " You will not let us down."

Towler picked his helmet off the table and together they went out into the cold night. A slender moon had risen and Towler, hands in pockets, stood numbly surveying the scene. In the ravine, men in fur-trimmed coats were moving rapidly here and there. He caught the gleam of atomic arms, those pathetically out-dated terrestrial weapons ineffective against the force fields of the Partussians. He heard orders, quietly given but ringing like metal in his ears as the ravine walls buffeted them back. All these men moved united in a common cause, his cause—yet for Towler this was a chill moment of isolation ; he knew he was no man of action. The thought of the tension he would have to endure for the next few days left him limp.

" It has been a privilege to come and see you," he said formally.

" I am happy that Par-Chavorlem's present weakness permitted it," Rivars said. " No doubt he'll be glad to get back to the greater security of his original city. Is that closed down now ?"

" A skeleton staff keeps it running. A convoy takes orders and supplies there every dawn. It's appalling to think we'll be back there, spied on every moment, before the month's out."

" It will not be for long," Rivars said resoundingly, as Towler's two guides came up with the horses.

As Towler reluctantly mounted—his guides were already in the saddle—a runner came panting up to Rivars.

" A Starjjan force of estimated two hundred men reported from our outpost at Beaker's Hill, decamping, moving east north east towards the Varne Heights."

" I'll come," Rivars said. Breaking into a rapid walk, he vanished into the night. He had dismissed Towler from his mind.

" Let's get moving," one of the guides said.

They retraced their steps, riding at good speed through the moonlight. The journey was without incident ; despite his discomfort and tiredness, Towler even found pleasure in the great, mysterious land about him, in the dark trees beneath which they passed, in the subtle differences of temperature between hilltops and hollows, in the great dome of the firmament floating unsupported above them.

At the rubbish tip, an empty refuse cart awaited him. For concealment, Towler was forced into the tool box beneath the driver's seat. In frantic discomfort, he was bumped back into the Commission, lying with his heart thumping as they stopped at the gate for the guard's search. At last they rolled forward again, into captivity.

It was still dark when Towler regained his room, sick with apprehension lest his absence had been detected. But everything was usual ; the blank square of walls, the dark and battered armchair, the never-failing heat control, the shadowless light burning overhead. There in that static isolation he felt safe again.

Face down on his bed, he slept while the sun rose, was still sleeping when the freighter *Geboraa* touched down on Earth with Synvoret aboard.

To be continued

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THE THIRD WORD

by DAVID PORTER

Broughton scanned two more paragraphs of the Buckley file and then glanced up at the man standing on the other side of his desk.

" Yes ?" he asked. As he waited for the other to reply his eyes flickered from the hint of shabbiness in the striped grey suit, to the worn shoes, the sparse white hair, the dry papery skin. For a moment he wondered whether the old man was going to beg. But it was unlikely in the extreme—it was three years since his secretaries had last allowed a plea for money to be heard in this office.

" Yes ?" he said again, consciously letting a hint of irritation creep into his tone. His cold eyes stared directly at the visitor, emphasizing his impatience.

" I'm sorry to have interrupted you." The voice was firm, containing no trace of servility. " May I sit down ?" And he smiled, a slow smile which deepened the lines of his face.

Broughton's carefully manicured hand gestured brusquely to a chair. The other sank gratefully into its depths, breathing out slowly in what was almost a sigh.

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Broughton glanced at a card propped against the lamp at the corner of his desk. In its centre was printed the name *A. G. Enders* and underneath in his secretary's writing the words '*A personal matter of great importance.*'

"May I ask what you wanted to see me about, Mr. Enders?" he asked. "I'm afraid my time is rather limited." He gestured at the files on his desk.

"Yes," said Enders, speaking comfortably from the depths of his chair. "Yes, you may." He paused for a moment as if enjoying the other's impatience and then chuckled throatily. "I've come to blackmail you," he said.

Broughton's thick frame stiffened for an instant and then relaxed. "I'm afraid that's not possible," he said. "In the first place I've done nothing on which a blackmail threat could be based. In the second place I'm the executive director of a very large company and I can assure you that I know how to handle blackmailers." He laughed coldly, eyeing Enders with contempt. "There have been attempts before."

"I imagine there have," said Enders quietly, quite unruffled. "But this situation is rather different—perhaps I should have used the word 'bribe' rather than 'blackmail.'"

"I think, Mr. Enders, that you had better explain yourself rather more clearly before I ask my secretary to show you out." But the cool authority of his manner left the other unperturbed.

The old man chuckled and nodded slowly. "Yes, you're quite right. I'm afraid I've yielded to a weakness of mine and introduced the subject a bit too dramatically."

He leaned forward in his chair eyeing Broughton's set features carefully. "Does the name 'Hill' mean anything to you?" Although there was scarcely a perceptible change of expression he leaned back satisfied and went on: "I see that it does."

"I did know a man called Hill a long time ago," Broughton answered stiffly.

"Brian Hill. He was a psychiatrist. You went to him twenty-one years ago when you were twenty-eight. You were suffering from a minor neurosis the details of which don't concern us. Over a period of about nine months he treated you weekly, principally with deep hypnotherapy. At the end of that time you were cured."

Enders had spoken dryly, his tone matter-of-fact. Now he twisted in his chair, finding a more comfortable position, and fished out a stubby pipe which he proceeded to stoke methodically and in silence. Broughton sat stonily at the desk watching him, outwardly calm. But his left hand fiddled nervously with an ornate paperweight, betraying the inner tension. With the pipe lighted to his satisfaction Enders continued.

" I was Brian Hill's teacher and to a certain extent, his friend. When you went to him he was comparatively inexperienced and, although you were unaware of the fact, I collaborated with him in your treatment, particularly in the hypnotherapy which happens to be my specialization. There were even a number of occasions when, after you'd been ' put under ', I was alone with you for considerable periods.

" Brian and I made a discovery which he put down to delusion but which I, perhaps because of greater experience, realized to be cold fact. In the deepest layers of your mind you knew that you were an extra-terrestrial—you are not a citizen of this earth."

For a long second Broughton's mask of authority dissolved and he leaned across the desk, staring into the other's eyes with frank incredulity. Then he sat back and snorted.

" This is preposterous rubbish," he exclaimed. " You are basing a ridiculous fairy tale on the simple fact of my treatment by Hill all those years ago. Do you really expect me to believe that you were his teacher ? That you treated me without my knowledge ?

" And what about the physical side ? Do I look green to you ? Have I got concealed tentacles ? I've been examined by a score of doctors in my time and none of them have noticed anything peculiar." He snorted again in disgust. " But there's no need to refute such an obvious fabrication." His hand moved toward the button which would summon his secretary.

" This is not a fabrication." For the first time Enders' voice was stern. " You underestimate me if you think I would present you with these facts without the means to prove them."

" You have some proof ?" Broughton's hand was suddenly still, his confidence shaken at last by the conviction in the other's tone.

" Yes, proof that you will accept without question.

" I told you that I had opportunities to be with you alone when you were under hypnosis. It may not have been very ethical but I planted three post-hypnotic suggestions deep in your mind and keyed them to three words. When I speak the first word memories of your planet of origin will rise in your mind. The second word allows you to remember the means by which you can return to it."

He broke off and doubled up in his chair as his frail body was suddenly racked with a violent fit of coughing. Broughton poured a glass of water from the beaker on his desk and handed it across, then waited impatiently as the fit subsided. And he saw again what the firm voice went far towards concealing : Enders was old and weak. He wondered for the first time whether he might not be listening to the feeble imaginings of a senile mind.

" And the third word ?" he asked as Enders finally settled back in his chair, exhausted.

" I'm an old man," said Enders feebly. " That's why I've come to you to-day."

" What about the third word ?" asked Broughton impatiently. " What does the third word do ?"

Enders paused to re-light his pipe. At last he said " I'm afraid I can't tell you that yet." And his voice carried a sudden authority so that the angry protest which had risen to Broughton's lips died unsaid.

The old man chuckled again. " You may find the actual words a little foolish. They aren't words at all really—just jumbled syllables. But I had to choose something that you would be extremely unlikely to hear in the normal course of conversation."

" Let's get this over with," said Broughton tightly, suddenly feeling he was being made to look foolish. " What is your first word ?"

Enders looked directly at him and gestured with his pipe. " The first word," he said, " is mescalinability."

A door opened in Broughton's mind.

He was standing on a hillside with a forest at his back, with a field in front, and with a city spread out below him in the valley.

But the foliage of the forest was tall and thin, strangely fluid, bending gently in the soft breeze. Its colours were oranges and blacks and streaks of blue.

And the field before him was immense, stretching in geometrically precise rows as far as he could see. The crop he recognized as hrona, straggling yellowish bushes which were being tended by tentacled metal cubes floating silently between the rows.

And in the distance the city glittered in the sun.

He turned and walked towards his aircar. And he was suddenly overwhelmed with an almost physical feeling of *rightness*. This is Yntrivar, he thought, this is my home and this is my land.

The scene changed and he was standing on a walkway in the city. He knew the city was Kordivarn because he could see the towering walls of the Institute rising majestically a mile away to the north. In the street the vehicles glided by silently, uniformly the prescribed eighteen inches from the ground. And the city was silent, the stillness broken only by the gentle mutter of pedestrian conversation and by the almost inaudible whine of ground-car power plants.

And again that sense of *belongingness*. The roar and stench of the London traffic seemed suddenly wrong, unnatural.

And then he remembered the soft grey of their apartment. He stood in the middle of the lounge looking up through the ceiling to the dim rose of the night cloud and Ventrilena was standing with her back to him at the bar in the corner. She turned and walked towards him, carrying a frosty glass, her movement soft beauty. She was incredibly slim and lovely as she smiled at him in the gentle light.

The scene faded and he felt an overpowering loneliness. A passionate longing for Kordivarn and home.

" Well ?" asked Enders, eyeing him with a faint smile.

Gradually Broughton became aware of his surroundings, the heavy littered desk, the panelled office, the old man watching him from the leather chair.

He breathed deeply for a minute, his mind still filled with a jumble of new memories, then slowly pulled himself to his feet and crossed to the window.

" Yes," he said at last without turning. " You have produced proof which I could not possibly reject." The arrogance and authority were quite gone and in their place his hard face had softened to a bewildered awe.

He made a wide gesture which took in the office, the view from the window, the whole planet. " Suddenly this has all become strange, *alien*."

" You remembered, then."

" Yes."

" What is your planet like ?"

Broughton hesitated. " It's called Yntrivar. It's mainly an agricultural planet that trades extensively in processed hrona with the neighbouring worlds of the Federation.

" But I can't begin to describe it. There's warm rolling country with not much sea. It's got far more cloud than this planet and the gravity's a bit less. And the cities are quiet and clean, and the people are . . ." His voice trailed off. Then he turned from the window and faced the chair. " I can't describe it. It's beautiful and it's home. I've got to get back."

He strode across to Enders and looked down at him desperately. " You've got to tell me the second word so that I can remember how to get back."

Enders looked up at him tiredly and for a fleeting instant there was compassion in his eyes. Then he motioned to the desk, indicating that the younger man should sit down.

" When I first came in," he said, " I used the words blackmail and bribe. The fact of the matter is that the second word has a price attached to it."

" My God, man," Broughton broke in, " if that's your worry, dismiss it. You can have everything I've got. It should come to over half a million. I won't need it where I'm going !" There was an edge of hysteria in his laugh.

" I'm afraid it's not as simple as that. Let me try to explain." He relaxed and sucked the pipe to life as the younger man waited impatiently.

" I'm an old man. I'm too close to seventy for my own comfort. But I've led a very full life and a very interesting one. But when I was working with Brian Hill and discovered your secret, I saw an opportunity which I felt I couldn't miss. I realized that when I got tired of this life there might be a way out.

" Don't misunderstand me. I haven't kept you in ignorance of your nature simply because it was convenient to me. There are reasons why you *couldn't* have returned to your home until very recently. It's principally a question of what you might call ' mental maturity.'

" No. I'll be blunt. The price of the second word is your sincere promise to do all you can to take me with you."

Broughton threw back his head and laughed. " I should have guessed," he said ruefully. Then he leaned forward and asked " You're expecting immortality, aren't you ?"

" I'm not so simple-minded as that." It was Enders turn to laugh. " But in what I caught from your mind all those years ago I gathered that your planet's inhabitants have a pretty long life span. Is that so ?"

" Yes. We live for centuries rather than years. You may be lucky." And again Broughton laughed.

Then he sobered and looked up sharply. " But why am I here ? I mean what am I doing on this planet with all my memories buried so deeply ? Do you know ? Is that the third word ?"

Slowly Enders shook his head. " No, I don't know. I couldn't find anything in your mind to suggest a reason for your presence on this planet. I'm afraid the only reason which my speculation has been able to produce is not a very complimentary one."

" What's that ?"

" Could you have been some kind of criminal ? Could this be a sort of penal institution to which social undesirables can be banished with memory erasure ?"

Broughton stared into space for a time, searching his mind for details of his departure from Yntrivar. Searching even for memories of the times shortly before he had come to earth. But the only images which arose with any clarity were those he had already seen—the fields, the city, his wife.

Sadly he shook his head. " I don't know," he said in despair. " I just don't know. You might even be right."

With an effort he brightened. " But I'll do what you want. Give me the second word and I agree to do everything in my power to help you get to Yntrivar."

The white head nodded, accepting his promise. " The second word," said Enders, " is abelintrabel."

Fór a long time Broughton sat quite still, breathing shallowly, gradually collecting the new understanding which flooded his mind. At last he turned back to Enders.

" It's a type of organization of the mind," he said carefully, almost as if he were trying to explain it to himself. " I mean the effort to get back. I can't transport us myself. We don't use spaceships or anything like that.

" All I can do is transmit a request for help. I don't really understand any more than that except how to do it. I don't

even know who or what will reply." He was mystified, disappointed that the additional information was so incomplete.

Enders finally broke the silence by asking " Aren't you going to do it ?" For the first time his thin frame was tense, his teeth clenched hard on the pipestem.

" I'm afraid." Broughton spoke simply. " I know it's ridiculous but I'm genuinely afraid to take the final step."

" What are you afraid of ?" Enders asked gently.

" I don't know. A sort of uncertainty in my mind. A shadow of doubt. Something intangible." He shrugged his heavy shoulders wearily.

" Doubt ? Don't you believe your own memories ?"

" Yes, it's not that. Give me a minute or two and I'll be all right." He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes.

They sat silently for a time, Enders watching warily from under bushy eyebrows.

At last the man behind the desk tensed, his hands gripping the arms of his chair. A thin film of perspiration glistened on his forehead. The room became very still.

And suddenly beyond the desk there was a faint pop and a third man appeared, standing casually, watching the other two.

He was oddly dressed. A smooth tunic hung loosely on his big frame, gathered tight at ankles and wrists.

Enders sighed happily and climbed to his feet. He crossed the room and shook the newcomer's outstretched hand.

" Well, Mik," he asked jovially, " how did I do ?"

" It's early to say yet, Paul." The tanned face smiled. " All the early returns won't be correlated for some time. About another half cycle. But offhand I'd say you placed well. Your time is four point three cycles." He laughed. " About twice as good as my best."

Enders shrugged modestly. He looked down at himself ruefully and said, " It's good to see you. I'm looking forward to getting out of this body."

Broughton stared wildly from one to the other. He looked utterly lost. " How do you two know each other ?" Then accusingly to the newcomer : " You're supposed to have come for me."

Mik turned to Enders and raised an inquiring eyebrow. Enders walked over to the desk and looked down at Broughton.

" I'm afraid I have to confess that I've deceived you, Mr. Broughton," he said. " You see *I'm* the extra-terrestrial, not you."

" You ? " said Broughton stupidly, not understanding. " But what about my memories ? I can remember Yntrivar. How can all that be false ?" He looked pathetically up at Enders : " Tell me you're joking."

" I'm not joking," Enders replied, looking at him sadly. " The memories are real as far as they go, but they happen to be mine, not yours. The one thing which didn't occur to you, which I was afraid you might guess, was that if I can plant a post-hypnotic suggestion I can also implant the memories which seem to go with it."

" But why ?" Broughton asked wretchedly. " Why have you done this to me ?"

" My object was to get back to my planet as fast as possible. I couldn't do it alone. You happen to have a very unusual type of mind which can be organized into the mental equivalent of a radio beacon with the proper training. I gave you that training under hypnosis. But I've had to wait twenty-one of your years for it to be integrated and for your mind to mature.

" To-day I've simply turned on the beacon and Mik, here, has come to take me home."

Broughton slumped forward in his chair, only partly understanding, but drained of hope, filled with the bitter realization that he had been used.

Suddenly he looked up. " But the third word ? You said there were three words."

Silently Enders nodded. Then he gestured to Mik and as the two aliens vanished the nonsense syllables of the last word hung for a moment in the silent air.

Vaguely Broughton gazed round at the empty office. Then the wall clock over the door caught his eye and he exclaimed in surprise. He confirmed its reading with his watch and shook his head ruefully. To-day was not a day which he could waste in day-dreams.

He picked up the Buckley file. There was a lot of work to be done.

David Porter

Try this new Ballard theme—optical illusion or a different form of Time travel ? The problem would be for an outside observer to decide which was the genuine article and which the illusion.

ZONE OF TERROR

by J. G. BALLARD

Larsen had been waiting all day for Bayliss, the psychologist who lived in the next chalet, to pay the call he had promised on the previous evening. Characteristically, Bayliss had made no precise arrangements as regards time ; a tall, moody man with an off-hand manner, he had merely gestured vaguely with his hypo and mumbled something about the following day : he would look in, probably. Larsen knew damned well he would look in, the case was too interesting to miss, in an oblique way it meant as much to Bayliss as it did to himself.

Except that it was Larsen who had to do the worrying—by three that afternoon Bayliss had still not materialised, and what was he doing except sit in his white-walled, air-conditioned lounge, playing Bartok quartets on the stereogram. Meanwhile Larsen had nothing to do but roam around the chalet, slamming impatiently from one room to the next like a tiger with an anxiety neurosis, cook up a quick lunch (coffee and three amphetamines, from a private cache Bayliss as yet only dimly suspected—God, he needed the stimulants after those massive barbiturate shots Bayliss pumped into him after the

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attack) and try to settle down with Kretschmer's *An Analysis of Psychotic Time*, a heavy tome full of graphs and tabular material which Bayliss had insisted he read, asserting that it filled in necessary background to the case. Larsen had spent a couple of hours on it, but so far he had got no further than the preface to the fourth edition.

Periodically he went over to the window, peered through the plastic vanes of the blind for any signs of movement in the next chalet. Beyond, the desert lay in the sunlight like an enormous bleached bone, against which the flaring, aztec-red tail fins of Bayliss's Pontiac glittered like a flamboyant phoenix. The remaining three chalets were empty ; the complex was operated by the electronics company for which he and Bayliss worked as a sort of ' re-creational ' centre for senior executives and tired think-men. The desert site had been chosen for its hypotensive virtues, its supposed equivalence to psychic zero. Two or three days of leisurely reading, of thoughtfully watching the motionless horizons, and the neuronic grids re-aligned, tension and anxiety threshholds rose to more useful levels, creative and decisional activity heightened.

However, two days there, Larsen reflected, and he had very nearly gone mad. It was lucky Bayliss had been around, with his handy hypo. Though the man was certainly casual when it came to supervising his patients, left them to their own resources, in fact, looking back, he—Larsen—had been responsible for just about all the diagnosis. Bayliss had done little more than thumb his hypo, toss Kretschmer into his lap, and offer some cogitating asides.

Perhaps he was waiting for something ?

Larsen tried to decide whether to phone Bayliss on some pretext ; his number—O, on the internal system—was almost too inviting. Then he heard a door clatter outside, leapt to the window and saw the tall, angular frame of the psychologist crossing the concrete apron between the chalets, head bowed pensively in the sharp sunlight, hands in pockets.

Where's his valise, Larsen thought, almost disappointed, don't tell me he's putting on the barbiturate brakes. Maybe he'll try hypnosis. Masses of post hypnotic suggestions, in the middle of shaving I'll suddenly stand on my head.

He let Bayliss in, fidgetting around him as they went into the lounge.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked. "Do you realise it's nearly four?"

Bayliss sat down at the miniature executive desk in the middle of the lounge and looked round critically, a ploy Larsen resented but never managed to anticipate.

"Of course I realise it. I'm fully wired for time." Letting this pass, he went on: "How have you felt today? No residues at all? Vision, memory, functional apparat okay?" He pointed to the straight-backed chair placed in the interviewee's position at the desk's left-hand corner. "Sit down and try to relax."

Larsen gestured irritably. "How can I relax? Just hanging around here, waiting for the next bomb to go off." He began his analysis of the past twenty-four hours, a task he enjoyed, larding the case history with liberal doses of speculative commentary.

"Actually, last night was easier. I think I'm entering a new zone. Everything's beginning to stabilise, lose that edgy feel. I'm not looking over my shoulder all the time. I've left the inside doors open, and before I enter a room I deliberately anticipate it, try to extrapolate its depth and dimensions so that it doesn't *surprise* me—before I used to open a door and just dive through like a man stepping into an empty lift shaft."

Larsen paced up and down, cracking his knuckles. Eyes half closed, Bayliss watched him steadily. "I'm pretty sure there won't be another attack," Larsen continued. "In fact, the best thing is probably for me to get straight back to the plant, after all there's no point in sitting around here indefinitely. I feel more or less completely okay."

Bayliss nodded slowly. "In that case, then, why are you so jumpy?"

Exasperated, Larsen clenched his fists. He could almost hear the artery thudding angrily in his temple. "I'm *not* jumpy! For God's sake, Bayliss, I thought the advanced view was that psychiatrist and patient shared the illness together, forgot their own identities and took equal responsponsibility. You're trying to slide out—"

"I am not," Bayliss cut in firmly. "I accept complete responsibility for you. That's why I want you to stay here until you've come to terms with this thing."

Larsen snorted. " ' Thing ' ! Now you're trying to make it sound like something out of a horror movie. All I had was a simple hallucination. And I'm not even completely convinced it was that." He pointed through the window. "Suddenly opening the garage door in that bright sunlight—it might have been just a shadow."

" You described it pretty exactly," Bayliss commented. " Colour of the hair, moustache, the clothes he wore."

" Back projection. The detail in dreams is authentic too." Larsen moved the chair out of the way and leaned forwards across the desk. " Another thing. I don't feel you're being entirely frank."

Their eyes levelled. Bayliss studied Larsen carefully for a moment, noticing his widely dilated pupils, then looked away.

" Well ?" Larsen pressed.

Bayliss stood up, buttoned his jacket and walked across to the door. " I'll call in tomorrow. Meanwhile try to unwind yourself a little. I'm not trying to alarm you, Larsen, but this problem may be rather more complicated than you imagine." He nodded, then slipped out before Larsen could reply.

Larsen stepped over to the window, through the blind watched the psychologist disappear into his chalet. Disturbed for a moment, the sunlight again settled itself heavily over everything. A few minutes later the sounds of one of the Bartok quartets whined fretfully across the apron.

Larsen went back to the desk and sat down, elbows thrust forwards aggressively. Bayliss irritated him, with his neurotic music and inaccurate diagnoses, and he felt tempted to climb straight into his car and drive back to the plant. Strictly speaking, though, the psychologist outranked Larsen, and probably had executive authority over him while he was at the chalet, particularly as the five days he had spent there were in the company's time.

He gazed round the silent lounge, tracing the cool horizontal shadows that dappled the walls, listening to the low soothing hum of the air-conditioner. His argument with Bayliss had refreshed him and he felt composed and confident. Yet shallow residues of tension and uneasiness still existed, and he found it difficult to keep his eyes off the open doors to the bedroom and kitchen.

He had arrived at the chalet five days earlier, exhausted and over-wrought, on the verge of a total neuronic collapse. For

three months he had been working without a break on programming the complex circuitry of a huge brain simulator which the company's Advanced Designs Division were building for one of the big psychiatric foundations. This was a complete electronic replica of the central nervous system, each spinal level represented by a single computor, other computors holding massive memory banks in which sleep, tension, aggression and other psychic functions were coded and stored, building blocks that could be played into the CNS simulator to construct models of dissociation states and withdrawal syndromes, any psychic complex on demand.

The design teams working on the simulator had been watched vigilantly by Bayliss and his assistants, and the weekly tests had revealed the mounting load of fatigue and worry that Larsen was carrying. Finally Bayliss had pulled him off the switchback and sent him out to the desert for two or three days' recuperation.

Larsen had been glad to get away. For the first two days he had lounged aimlessly around the deserted chalets, pleasantly fuddled by the barbiturates Bayliss prescribed, gazing out across the white deck of the desert floor, going to bed by eight and sleeping until noon. Every morning the caretaker had driven in from the town nearby to clean up and leave the groceries and menu slips, but Larsen never saw her, only too glad to be alone. Deliberately seeing no one, allowing the natural rhythms of his mind to re-establish themselves, he knew he would soon recover.

In fact, though, the first person he had seen had suddenly stepped up to him straight out of a nightmare.

Larsen still looked back on the encounter with a shudder.

After lunch on his third day at the chalet he had decided to drive out into the desert and examine an old quartz mine in one of the canyons. This was a two-hour trip and he had made up a thermos of iced martini and stowed it in the back seat. The garage was adjacent to the chalet, set back from the kitchen side entrance, and fitted with a roll steel door that lifted vertically and curved up under the roof.

Larsen had locked the chalet behind him, then raised the garage door and driven his car out onto the apron. Going back for the thermos which he had left on the bench at the rear of the garage he had noticed a full jerrican of gas in the

shadows against one corner. For a moment he paused, adding up his mileage, and decided to take the can with him. He carried it over to the car, then turned round to close the garage door.

The roll had failed to retract completely when he had first raised it, and reached down to the level of his chin. Putting his weight on the handle, Larsen managed to move it down a few inches, the sunlight reflected in the steel panels dazzling his eyes, but the inertia was too much for him. Pressing his palms under the door, he jerked it upwards slightly to gain more momentum on the downward swing.

The interval was small, no more than six inches, but it was just enough for him to see into the darkened garage.

Hiding in the shadows against the back wall near the bench, was the indistinct but nonetheless unmistakable figure of a man. He stood motionless, arms loosely at his sides, watching Larsen. He wore a light cream suit, covered by patches of shadow that gave him a curious fragmentary look, a neat blue sportshirt and two-tone shoes. He was stockily built, with a thick brush moustache and plump face, eyes that stared steadily at Larsen but somehow seemed to be focused beyond him.

Still holding the door with both hands, Larsen gaped at the man blankly. Not only was there no means by which he could have entered the garage—there were no windows or side doors—but there was something definitely menacing about his stance.

Larsen was about to call to him when the man suddenly moved forward and stepped straight out of the shadows towards him.

Aghast, Larsen backed away. The dark patches across the man's suit were not shadows at all, but the outline of the work bench directly behind him.

The man's body and clothes were transparent, he was a living zombie !

Galvanised into life, Larsen choked off his scream, seized the garage door and hurled it down. He dived at the lock, snapped the bolt in and jammed it closed with both hands, knees pressed against it desperately.

Half paralysed by cramp and barely breathing, suit soaked in sweat, he was still holding the door down when Bayliss drove up thirty minutes later.

Larsen drummed his fingers irritably on the desk, stood up and went into the kitchen. Cut off from the barbiturates they had been intended to counteract, the three amphetamines had begun to make him feel restless and over-stimulated. He switched the coffee percolator on and then off, prowled back to the lounge and sat down on the sofa with the copy of Kretschmer.

He read a few pages, increasingly impatient. What light Kretschmer threw on his problem was hard to see, most of the case histories described deep schizos and irreversible paranoids. His own problem was much more superficial, a momentary aberration due to overloading. Why wouldn't Bayliss see this? For some reason he seemed to be unconsciously wishing for a major crisis, probably because he, the psychologist, secretly wanted to become the patient.

Larsen tossed the book aside, looked out through the window at the desert. Suddenly the chalet seemed dark and cramped, a claustrophobic focus of suppressed aggressions. He stood up, strode over to the door and stepped out into the clear open air.

Grouped in a loose semi-circle, the chalets seemed to shrink towards the ground as he strolled to the rim of the concrete apron a hundred yards away, the mountains behind looming up enormously. It was late afternoon, on the edge of dusk, and the sky was a vivid vibrant blue, highlighted by the deepening colours of the desert floor, overlayed by the huge lanes of shadow that reached from the mountains against the sun-line. Larsen turned and looked back at the chalets. There was no sign of movement, other than a faint discordant echo of the atonal music Bayliss was playing, and the whole scene seemed suddenly unreal.

Reflecting on this, Larsen felt something shift inside his mind. The sensation was undefined, like an expected cue that had failed to materialise, a forgotten intention. He tried to recall it, unable to remember whether he had switched on the coffee percolator.

He walked back to the chalets, noticing that he had left the kitchen door open. As he passed the lounge window on his way to close it he glanced in over his shoulder.

A man was sitting on the sofa, legs crossed, face hidden by the volume of Kretschmer. For a moment Larsen assumed that Bayliss had called in to see him, and walked on, deciding to make coffee for them both. Then he noticed that the stereogram was still playing in Bayliss's chalet.

Picking his steps carefully, he moved back to the lounge window and craned round it cautiously. The man's face was still hidden, but a single glance confirmed that the visitor was not Bayliss. He was wearing the same cream suit Larsen had seen two days earlier, the same two-tone shoes. But this time the man was no hallucination, his hands and clothes were solid and palpable. He shifted about on the sofa, denting one of the cushions, turned a page of the book, flexing the spine between his hands.

Pulse thickening, Larsen watched him carefully, bracing himself against the window ledge. Something about the man, his posture, the way he held his hands, convinced him that he had seen him before their fragmentary encounter in the garage.

Then the man lowered the book and threw it onto the seat beside him. He sat back and looked through the window, his focus only a few inches from Larsen's face.

Mesmerised, Larsen stared back at him. He recognised the man without doubt, the pudgy face, the nervous eyes, the too thick moustache. Now at last he could see him clearly and realised he knew him only too well, better than anyone else on Earth.

The man was himself !

Bayliss clipped the hypodermic into his valise, placed it on the lid of the stereogram.

" Hallucination is the wrong term altogether," he told Larsen, who was lying stretched out on Bayliss's sofa, sipping weakly at a glass of hot whisky. " Stop using it. A psycho-retinal image of remarkable strength and duration, but not an hallucination."

Larsen gestured feebly. He had stumbled into Bayliss's chalet an hour earlier, literally beside himself with fright. Bayliss had calmed him down, then dragged him back across the apron to the lounge window, made him accept that his double had gone. Bayliss wasn't in the least surprised at the identity of the phantom, and this worried Larsen almost as much as the actual hallucination. What else was Bayliss hiding up his sleeve ?

" I'm surprised you didn't realise it sooner yourself," Bayliss remarked. " Your description of the man in the garage was so obvious—the same cream suit, the same shoes and shirt, let alone the exact physical similarity, even down to your moustache."

Recovering a little, Larsen sat up. He smoothed down his cream gaberdine suit, brushed the dust off his brown and white shoes. " Thanks for warning me. All you've got to do now is tell me who he is."

Bayliss sat down in one of the chairs. " What do you mean, who he is ? He's you, of course."

" I know that, but why, where does he come from ? God, I must be going insane."

Bayliss snapped his fingers. " No, you're not, pull yourself together. This is a purely functional disorder, like double vision or amnesia, nothing more serious. If it was I'd have pulled you out of here long ago. Perhaps I should have done anyway, but I think we can find a quick safe way out of the image maze you're in."

He took a notebook out of his breast pocket. " Let's have a look at what we've got. Now, two features stand out above all others. First, the phantom is yourself, there's no doubt about that, he's an exact replica of you. More important, though, he is you as you are now, your exact contemporary in time, unidealised, unmutilated, with no compensation devices working at all. He isn't the shining youthful hero of the super-ego, or the haggard greybeard of the death wish. He is simply a photographic double. Displace one eyeball gently with your finger and you'll see a double of me. Your double is no more unusual, with the exception that the displacement is not in space but in time. You see, the second thing I noticed about your garbled description of this phantom was that, not only was he a photographic double, but he was doing exactly what you yourself had been doing a few minutes previously. The man in the garage was standing by the workbench, just where you stood when you were wondering whether to take the jerrican of gas. Again, the man reading in the armchair was merely repeating exactly what you had been doing, with the same book, five minutes earlier. He even stared out of the window as you say you did before going out for a stroll."

Larsen nodded slowly, sipping a whisky. " You're suggesting then, that the hallucination was nothing more than a sort of mental flashback ?"

" Precisely. The stream of retinal images reaching the optic lobes is nothing more than a film strip. Every image is stored away, thousands of reels, a hundred thousand hours of running time. Usually flashbacks are deliberate, when we consciously

select a few blurry stills from the film library, a childhood scene, the image of our neighbourhood streets we carry around with us all day near the surface of consciousness. But upset the projector slightly—over-strain could do it—suddenly jolt it back a few hundred frames, and you'll superimpose a completely irrelevant strip of already exposed film, in your case a glimpse of yourself sitting on the sofa. It's the apparent irrelevancy that is so frightening."

Larsen gestured with his glass. " Wait a minute, though. When I was sitting on the sofa reading Kretschmer I didn't actually see myself, any more than I can see myself now. So where did the superimposed images come from ?"

Bayliss put away his notebook. " Don't take the analogy of the film strip too literally. You may not see yourself sitting on that sofa, but your awareness of being there is just as powerful as visual corroboration. It's the multi-channel stream of tactile, positional and psychic images that form the real data store. Very little extrapolation is needed to transpose the observer's eye a few yards to the other side of a room. Purely visual memories are never completely accurate anyway."

" How do you explain why the man I saw in the garage was transparent ?"

" Quite simply. The process was only just beginning, the intensity of the image was weak. The one you saw this afternoon was much stronger. I cut you off barbiturates deliberately knowing full well that those stimulants you were taking on the sly would really trigger something if they were allowed to operate unopposed."

He went over to Larsen, took his glass and refilled it from the decanter. " But let's think of the future. The most interesting aspect of all this is the light it throws on one of the oldest archetypes in the human psyche—the ghost—and the whole supernatural army of phantoms, witches, demons and so on. *Are they all, in fact, nothing more than psycho-retinal flashbacks, transposed images of the observer himself, jolted onto the the retinal screen by fear, bereavement, religious obsession* ? The most notable thing about the majority of ghosts is how prosaically equipped they are, compared with the elaborate literary productions of the great mystics and dreamers. The nebulous white sheet is probably the observer's own nightgown. It's an interesting field for speculation. For example, take the most famous ghost in literature and reflect

how much more sense Hamlet makes if you realise that the ghost of his murdered father is really Hamlet himself."

"All right, all right," Larsen cut in irritably. "But how does this help me?"

Bayliss broke off his reflective up and down patrol of the floor, fixed an eye on Larsen. "I'm coming to that. There are two methods of dealing with this disfunction of yours. The classical technique is to pump you full of tranquillisers and brick you into a bed for a year or so. Gradually your mind would knit together, and primary neural pathways reassemble themselves. Long job, boring for you and everybody else. The alternative method is frankly experimental, but I think it might work. I mentioned the phenomenon of the ghost because it's an interesting fact that although there have been tens of thousands of recorded cases of people being pursued by ghosts, and a few of the ghosts themselves being pursued, there have been no cases of ghost and observer actually meeting of their own volition. Tell me, what would have happened if, when you saw your double this afternoon, you had gone straight into the lounge and spoken to him?"

Larsen shuddered. "Obviously nothing, if your theory holds. I wouldn't like to test it."

"That's just what you're going to do. Don't panic. The next time you see a double sitting in a chair reading Kretschmer go up and speak to him. If he doesn't reply sit down in the chair yourself. That's all you have to do."

Larsen jumped up, gesticulating. "For heaven's sake, Bayliss, are you crazy? Do you know what it's like to suddenly see yourself? All you want to do is run."

"I realise that, but it's the worst thing you can do. Why, whenever anyone grapples with a ghost, does it always vanish instantly? Because forcibly occupying the same physical co-ordinates as the double jolts the psychic projector onto a single channel again, the two separate streams of retinal images coincide and fuse. You've got to try, Larsen. It may be quite an effort, but you'll cure yourself once and for all, really blast those neuronic pathways clear again."

Larsen shook his head stubbornly. "The idea's insane." To himself he added: I'd rather shoot the thing. Then he remembered the .38 in his suitcase, and the presence of the weapon gave him a stronger sense of security than all Bayliss's drugs and advice. The revolver was a simple symbol of aggres-

sion, and even if the phantom was only an intruder in his own mind, it gave that portion which still remained intact greater confidence, enough possibly to dissipate the double's power.

Eyes half closed with fatigue, he listened vaguely to Bayliss, nodding agreement to the latter's injunctions. Half an hour later he went back to his chalet, found the revolver and hid it under a magazine in the letter-box outside the lounge door. It was too conspicuous to carry, and anyway might fire accidentally and injure him. Outside the front door it would be safely hidden and yet easily accessible, ready to mete out a little old-fashioned punishment to any double dealer trying to play a fifth ace into the game.

Two days later, with unexpected vengeance, the opportunity came.

Bayliss had driven into town to buy a new stylus for the stereogram, leaving Larsen to prepare lunch for them while he was away. Larsen pretended to resent the chore, but secretly he was glad of something to do, tired of hanging around the chalets while Bayliss watched him as if he were an experimental animal, eagerly waiting for the next crisis. With luck this might never come, if only to spite Bayliss, who had been having everything too much his own way. Larsen had cut out the amphetamines altogether and felt nearer normalcy than he had done at any time over the last three months.

After laying the table in Bayliss's kitchenette and getting plenty of ice ready for the martinis (alcohol was just the thing, Larsen readily decided, a wonderful CNS depressant) he went back to his chalet and put on a clean shirt. On an impulse he decided to change his shoes and suit as well, and fished out the blue office serge and black oxfords he had worn on his way out to the desert. Not only were the associations of the cream suit and sports-shoes unpleasant, but a complete change of costume might well forestall the double's re-appearance, provide a fresh psychic image of himself powerful enough to suppress any wandering versions. Looking at himself in the mirror, he decided to carry the principle even further, switched on his shaver and cut away his moustache. Then he thinned out his hair, plastered it back smoothly across his scalp.

The transformation was certainly effective. When Bayliss climbed out of his car and walked into the lounge he almost failed to recognise Larsen, flinched back involuntarily at the

sight of the sleek-haired, dark-suited figure who stepped suddenly from behind the kitchen door.

" What the hell are you playing at ?" he snapped at Larsen. " This is no time for practical jokes." He surveyed Larsen critically. " You look like a cheap detective."

Larsen guffawed. The incident put him in high spirits, and after several martinis he began to feel extremely bouyant, talking away rapidly through the meal, a fund of wisecracks and humorous asides. Strangely, though, Bayliss seemed eager to get rid of him ; he realised why shortly after he returned to his chalet. His pulse had quickened, he found himself prowling around with rapid nervous movements, his brain felt over-active and accelerated. The martinis had only been partly responsible for his elation. Now that they were wearing off he began to see the real agent—some stimulant Bayliss had slipped him in the hope of precipitating another crisis.

Larsen stood by the window, staring out angrily at Bayliss's chalet. The psychologist's impudence and utter lack of scruple outraged him. His fingers fretted nervously across the blind, he suddenly felt like kicking the whole place down and speeding off. With its plywood-thin walls and match-box furniture the chalet was nothing more than a cardboard asylum, everything that had happened there, the breakdowns and his nightmarish phantoms, had probably been schemed up by Bayliss deliberately.

Larsen noticed that the stimulant seemed to be extremely powerful. The take-off was sustained and unbroken. He tried hopelessly to relax and level off, went into the bedroom and kicked his suitcase around, lit two cigarettes without realising it.

Finally, unable to contain himself any longer, he slammed the front door back and stormed out across the apron, determined to have everything out with Bayliss and demand an immediate sedative.

Bayliss's lounge was empty. Larsen plunged through into the kitchen and bedroom, discovered to his annoyance that Bayliss was having a shower. He hung around helplessly in the lounge for a few moments, then decided to wait in his chalet.

Head down, he crossed the bright sunlight at a fast stride, and was only a few steps from the darkened doorway when

he noticed that a man in a blue suit was standing there watching him.

Heart seizing, Larsen shrank back, recognizing the double even before he had completely accepted the change of costume, the smooth-shaven face with its altered planes. The man hovered indecisively, flexing his fingers, and appeared to be on the verge of stepping down into the sunlight.

Larsen was about ten feet from him, directly in line with Bayliss's door. He backed away, at the same time swinging to his left to the lee of the garage. There he stopped and pulled himself together. The double was still hesitating in the doorway, longer, he was sure, than he himself had done. Larsen looked carefully at the face, repulsed and nauseated, not so much by the absolute accuracy of the image, but by a strange, almost luminous pastiness that gave the double's features the distinctive waxy sheen of a corpse. It was this unpleasant gloss that held Larsen back—the double was an arm's length from the letter-box holding the .38, and nothing could have induced Larsen to approach it.

He decided to enter the chalet and watch the double from behind. Rather than use the kitchen door, which gave access to the lounge on the double's immediate right, he turned to circle the garage and climb in through the bedroom window on the far side.

He was picking his way through a dump of old mortar and barbed wire behind the garage when he heard a voice call out:

"Larsen, you idiot, what do you think you're doing?"

It was Bayliss, leaning out of his bathroom window. Larsen stumbled, found his balance and waved Bayliss back angrily. Bayliss merely shook his head, leaned further out, drying his neck with a towel.

Larsen retraced his steps, signalling to Bayliss to keep quiet. He was crossing the interval between the garage wall and the near corner of Bayliss's chalet when out of the side of his eye he noticed a dark-suited figure standing with its back to him a few yards from the garage door.

The double had moved! Larsen stopped and whirled round, Bayliss forgotten, and watched the double warily. He was poised on the balls of his feet, as Larsen had been only a minute or so earlier, elbows up, hands weaving defensively. His eyes were hidden, but he appeared to be looking at the front door of Larsen's chalet.

Automatically, Larsen's eyes also moved to the doorway. The original blue-suited figure still stood there, staring out into the sunlight !

There was not one double now, but two !

For a moment Larsen goggled helplessly at the two figures, standing on either side of the apron like half-animated dummies in a wax-works tableau.

Suddenly the figure with its back to him swung sharply on one heel and began to stalk rapidly towards him. He stared sightlessly at Larsen, the sunlight exposing his face, and with a jolt of horror Larsen recognised for the first time the perfect similarity of the double—the same plump cheeks, the same mole by the right nostril, the white upper lip with the same small razor cut where the moustache had been shaved away. But above all he recognised the man's state of shock and anxiety, the nervous lips, the tension around the neck and facial muscles, the utter exhaustion just below the surface of the mask.

His voice strangled, Larsen turned and bolted.

He stopped running about two hundred yards out in the desert beyond the edge of the apron. Gasping for breath, he dropped to one knee behind a narrow sandstone outcropping and looked back at the chalets. The second double was making his way around the garage, climbing through the tangle of old wire. The other was crossing the interval between the chalets. Oblivious of them both, Bayliss was struggling with the bathroom window, forcing it back so that he could see out into the desert.

Trying to steady himself, Larsen wiped his face on his jacket sleeve. So Bayliss had been right, although he had never anticipated that more than one image could be seen during any single attack. But in fact Larsen had spawned two in close succession, each at a critical phase during the last five minutes. Somehow the psychic projector must have received two separate jolts, was now throwing two distinct streams of images onto the retinal screen.

Wondering whether to wait for the images to fade, Larsen remembered the revolver in the letter-box. However irrational, it seemed his only hope. With it he would be able to test the ultimate validity of the doubles, drive them back out of his mind.

The outcropping ran diagonally to the right to the edge of the apron. Crouching forwards, he scurried along it, pausing at intervals to follow the scene. The two doubles were still holding their positions, though Bayliss had closed his window and disappeared.

Larsen reached the edge of the apron, which was built on a shallow table about a foot off the desert floor, and moved along its rim to where an old fifty-gallon drum gave him a vantage point. To reach the revolver he decided to go round the far side of Bayliss's chalet, where he would find his own doorway unguarded except for the double watching by the garage.

He was about to step forward when something made him look over his shoulder.

Running straight towards him along the outcropping, head down, hands almost touching the ground, was an enormous rat-like creature, moving at tremendous speed. Every ten or fifteen yards it paused for a moment, and looked out at the chalets, and Larsen caught a glimpse of its face, insane and terrified, another replica of his own.

"Larsen! Larsen!"

Bayliss stood by the chalet, waving out at the desert.

Larsen glanced back at the phantom hurtling towards him, now only thirty feet away, then jumped up and lurched helplessly across to Bayliss.

Bayliss caught him firmly with his hands, pulled him together. "Larsen, what's the matter with you? Are you having an attack?"

Larsen gestured frantically at the figures around him. "Stop them, Bayliss, for God's sake," he gasped. "I can't get away from them."

Bayliss shook him roughly. "You can see *more* than one? Where are they, show me."

Larsen pointed at the two figures hovering luminously near the chalet, then waved limply in the direction of the desert. "By the garage, and over there along the wall. There's another hiding along that ridge."

Bayliss seized him by the arm. "Come on, man, you've got to face up to them, it's no use running." He tried to drag Larsen towards the garage, but Larsen pulled away and slipped down onto the concrete.

" I can't, Bayliss, believe me. There's a gun in my letter-box. Get it for me, it's the only way."

Bayliss hesitated, looking down at Larsen, slumped inertly on his knees. " All right. Try to hold on."

Larsen stood up, pointed to the far corner of Bayliss's chalet. " I'll wait over there for you."

As Bayliss ran off swiftly he hobbled towards the corner. Half-way there he tripped across the remains of an old ladder lying on the ground, twisted his right ankle savagely between two of the rungs

Clasping his foot, he sat down just as Bayliss appeared between the chalets, the .38 in his hand. He looked around uncertainly for Larsen, who cleared his throat to call to him.

Before he could open his mouth he saw the double who had followed him along the ridge leap up from behind the drum and stumble up to Bayliss across the concrete floor. He was dishevelled and exhausted, jacket almost off his shoulders, collar open, the tie knot under one ear. So the image was still pursuing him, dogging his footsteps like an obsessed shadow.

Larsen tried to call to Bayliss again, but something he saw choked the voice in his throat.

Bayliss was looking at his double !

Larsen wrenched himself to his feet, feeling a sudden premonition of terror. He tried to wave to Bayliss, but the latter was watching the double intently as it pointed to the figures nearby, nodding to it in apparent agreement.

" Bayliss !"

The shot drowned his cry. Bayliss had fired somewhere between the garages, and the echo of the shot bounded among the chalets. The double was still beside him, pointing in all directions. Bayliss raised the revolver and fired again. The sound slammed violently at Larsen, making him feel stunned and sick.

Now Bayliss too was suffering the same psychotic attack, seeing two simultaneous images, but in his case not of himself, but of Larsen, on whom his mind had been focusing for the past weeks. A repetition of Larsen stumbling over to him and pointing at the phantoms was being played over onto Bayliss's retinal screens, diabolically at the exact moment when he had returned with the revolver and was searching for a target.

Larsen started to stumble away, trying to reach the corner wall. A third shot roared through the air and a vicious flash of fire was reflected in the bathroom window.

He had almost reached the corner when he heard Bayliss scream. Leaning one hand against the wall he looked back.

Mouth open, Bayliss was staring wildly at him, the revolver clenched like a bomb in his hand. Beside him the blue-suited figure stood quietly, straightening its tie.

At last Bayliss had realized he could see two images of Larsen, one beside him, the other twenty feet away against the chalet.

But how was he to know which was the real Larsen? Staring blankly at Larsen, he seemed unable to decide.

Then the double by his shoulder raised one arm and pointed at Larsen, towards the corner wall to which he himself had pointed a minute earlier.

Larsen tried to scream, then hurled himself at the wall and desperately pulled himself along it. Behind him Bayliss's feet came thudding across the concrete.

He heard only the first of the three shots.

J. G. Ballard

British Convention—Easter 1960

Britain's major science fiction convention, sponsored by the British Science Fiction Association, will be held over Easter, April 15th to 18th; either in London or Kettering. Saturday and Sunday will be the two main business sessions. Attending this year's convention as one of the Guests of Honour and also as official TAFF delegate, will be Don Ford of Ohio, USA, the originator of this unique idea for the yearly exchange of one s-f fan across the Atlantic.

For further details send s.a.e. to The Newsletter Editor, 14 Bennington Street, Cheltenham, Glos.

From fire-cracker pilot to deep space man—a big difference in technical ability and mental outlook —but could a deep space man still handle a ferry rocket ?

PROFESSION: SPACEMAN

by KENNETH BULMER

The acrid, angry smell of rocket fuels drifted everywhere on the spaceport, from the gantries mothering ferry rockets, seeping into the passengers' waiting rooms and restaurants, penetrating to the ferry pilots' ready room, even stinking in the office and mess of the Space Rescue Service.

Johnny Howard commanded the muscles of his hand to hold his drink without a tremble while the foul rocket fuel smell caught at his throat. The ferry and rescue pilots' mess was loud and brash and full of good cheer. Howard remembered the comradeship without nostalgia ; the bonhomie that was a defiant group gesture against fear. Half a dozen ferry pilots lounged at the bar. Bruce Conway, an old rescue service hand who remembered Johnny Howard, had introduced him to the others.

" Johnny's a deep space driver these days," Conway said in his moustache-blowing way. " Left you taxi hacks to shuttle up to the stations and back—"

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" Shame on him !" and " Cushy number !" and one or two cat calls and outright raspberries greeted this. Howard arranged his smile for them.

" I was a jumping bean once," he said. " But not any more. Nothing in the job, no interest. Give me deep space any time."

Ferry pilots looked askance at any trip beyond the Moon.

" Shoving those damn great buses along," scoffed Alec Jurgens, a new boy very proud of the wings on his tunic. Nothing to do from takeoff to touchdown, if you can call just gently pushing off from a station a takeoff."

" I like it," Howard said pleasantly. They were ribbing him, he knew, a little in awe of the deep space man. The throaty lion growl of a rocket drifted in on the smell of fuel and he finished his drink quickly and ordered another, remembered, and made it a round. " You never know what you might bump into out there."

" But what do you *do* all day ?" persisted Jurgens.

He was about to give a sensible answer but Conway beat him to it with a facetious reply that brought a chorus of laughter. These men taking their little firecracker rockets up to the space stations and bringing them down twice a day had it off to an art. The imagined terrors of an orbit out past Mars loomed in their imaginations more frighteningly than any routine blastoff to a station, any matter-of-fact re-entry and landing at the spaceport.

Johnny Howard had very nearly refused his leave on Earth. He'd decided he'd never ride a firecracker again as long as he lived. His nerve had gone—if Lucy hadn't been so insistent about his returning to Earth—no good dreaming about that now. He'd suffered indescribably coming in for the landing strapped into a passenger couch. Now he was facing the takeoff and was filling himself with whisky as fast as was decent.

Conway was telling a story about pulling a satellite back into orbit after a jet failure. The others listened with professional interest, a little bored, knowing it all. Howard found the story gruesome.

Like all firecracker jockeys, he kept a permanent smile on his face. Only—he wasn't a fireball pilot any more, was he ? He'd got out, before a spinning wreck had taken him with it into a mushroom cloud of destruction. He was a deep space

boy. He had the stars, the long silences between planets, the contemplation and the knowledge that he didn't have to ride a package of high explosive up and down, back and forth, twice a day until in the end the high explosive turned on him and finished it all.

"Alec's taking you up, Johnny. You should be in the passengers' lounge by rights. Only ferry and rescue men in here, you know."

"I like it among the wild men." That was the way. Talk big. Hell—he was a deep space man. What did he have to worry over these firecracker jockeys for, anyway?

Conway was needling him. Howard didn't know why. Jealousy, perhaps? That was a laugh. The Space Rescue Service were big enough bugs in their own right not to have to worry over a single deep space man stealing any glory. And that was another laugh, too. Do a stint in space and any lingering ideas of glory vanished, puffed out in the screaming fears of takeoff, the gut-constricting fright that any one of a thousand components could hang up, malfunction—anything—and you were dead, dead, dead!

Howard took another whisky. The pilots were drinking lemonade, soft drinks, tea. They eyed his hard liquor; but didn't say anything.

Except Conway.

Howard could not explain it afterwards. One moment Conway was ribbing him, the atmosphere of jollity prevailed; the next Conway lay on the floor, his head against the footrail, and Howard was standing over him, staring in horror at what he had done, his knuckles still stinging.

"Here, I say!" "No need for that!" "Get him out of here, fast." Alec Jurgens stared contemptuously at Howard. Others lifted Conway, examined him, called the spaceport doctor. The ambulance siren wailed.

"I'm sorry—" Howard shook his head. He felt bemused. "I'm sorry—hell—Bruce is a pal—" ..

Jurgens said stiffly: "You'd better go over to the passengers' lounge, Howard. I'll see you aboard the ferry. "We thought you were one of us—"

Howard went. He did not say anything. There was nothing to be said.

In the lounge he sat moodily, drinking, hating himself, hating space, hating Earth; but most of all hating the agony

that was waiting out there, shining sleek and mocking in the gantry. And once he had been eager, fresh, full of high ideals like Jurgens. He'd even volunteered for the rescue service with those ideals still intact. A couple of years sitting on the spaceport or the stations, waiting for the emergency call had been enough. There had been too many incidents that no man should have to see, let alone try to rectify, for his peace of mind. So he'd quit cold. A spaceman had to live, just like anyone else and with the trade he held in his hands deep space had offered the only hope of employment.

He'd enjoyed deep space, enjoyed pushing the cumbrous freighters and liners out to the planets. It was a peaceful life after the rhythmic frenzy of the ferry rockets and the irregular, heart-stopping alarms of the rescue service.

The stench of rocket fuel grew worse as the coach carried the passengers over to the ferry. Howard had taken the precaution of slipping a hip flask into his pocket ; but he was not fool enough to get himself drunk just prior to a takeoff, even if he wasn't at the controls. Just a little blurriness around the edges of reality, a trifle of comfort and assurance against the fear gnawing rat-like at his mind—that was all he asked.

He recognised the fear as irrational. They left the coach, were taken up in the lift in the gantry and then transferred to the passenger compartment of the rocket. Alec Jurgens hadn't come to see him as he'd promised. Well, so what ? Conway was a tough customer ; a crack on the jaw wouldn't hurt him.

Okay, so the fear was irrational. But it existed. It gripped his stomach, clenching on it ; it dried his mouth and throat so that he kept wetting his lips unavailingly, and swallowing ; it put that damned tremble into his hands, and now for all the commands he gave his hands continued to shake. He sat down quietly and strapped in.

" Would you like a sleepy pill, sir ?"

The stewardess didn't know him. Young, blonde, trim and with that aching eagerness in her eyes that told him how dusty were his own dreams. He looked up at her, forcing the smile, thankful he could grasp the chair arms and still the tremble.

Play it big—play it the way you've always played it.

" I'm a deep space man," he said with an insolently pleasant smile that hurt him to frame.

" Oh—I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know." She moved on, taking her sleepy pills. Evidently, she hadn't heard what had happened in the pilots' mess.

Somewhere up front Jurgens would be going through his pre-flight routine. Into his own mind swam the drill ; it all came back. It was something he would not—could not—ever forget.

He made a promise. As soon as he hit the one gravity spinfield on the station he'd finish the bottle and Perkins, the first officer, could carry him aboard the ship. It wouldn't matter then. He'd be in command and what he said went—in deep space.

His mind rambled on, framing the situation which involved him. This was just one ferry, the three o'clock out, among many rising from the Earth out to the stations. Others would be curving down, losing speed, planing on their wings, using the atmosphere to retard and to support, flashing in on orbits that were the same every day, changing only from station to station as they precessed around the globe. Up there in the satellite lanes the space stations were spinning around, tenders were shuttling back and forth, spaceboats were busy on various errands. New stations were being built and established ones being enlarged. The scientists were hard at work, conducting their experiments, free alike of the Earth's gravity and atmosphere.

From out the deeps of space the great liners and freighters were swinging in, coasting gently under the guidance of tugs, nuzzling up against the stations. All about the Earth lay a swathe of activity, beneath and between the van Allen belts, with the high speed tenders racing through the danger zones with their human passengers subjected to the killing radiations for only short periods. He didn't mind the high-speed tenders. They contained couches to cushion bruising acceleration ; but they did not struggle up against the live, vital, hungry gravity of Earth.

The five minute signal sounded discreetly. The high-speed boats pushed off from the stations, flung out hard and fast for the slow liners that had preceded them—he'd never bothered about that. That was a part of the mystique of a deep space pilot, quite distinct from the terror that clawed at him now, waiting for the ferry to lift jets against gravity and take him to a station.

He was sweating. His mouth was dry and hot. His eyes were bleary. And his head ached.

The stewardess walked past, bestowing her smiles. He smiled back, winked ; he was very much the deep space hero.

Four minutes.

A tendril of thought occurred to him. He thrust it away. It came back. He lay there, sweating, hating himself, wondering just how far down in degradation a man must sink before he takes the inevitable and logical escape route.

Suppose, just suppose, his brain ticked on, torturing him, suppose Alec Jurgens had a fit, broke down, nerves shot? Suppose Jurgens, through any reason, was unable to pilot the ferry when it had blasted off?

Three minutes.

Suppose Jurgens was incapable? And he, Johnny Howard, was the only man aboard capable of handling the firecracker? He wouldn't think of that. His hand carressed the bottle in his pocket. The ferry would be his baby, then . . .

Two minutes.

The firecrackers were automatically controlled, of course. They needed a human brain for detail work, last minute adjustments, course matching that a machine couldn't handle. The rescue rockets were different ; they were almost all humanly operated, machines didn't as yet exist that could handle emergencies. A machine can think and cope with problems that it knows by programming ; the punched tapes and the magnetic drums contained foreseeable accident emergencies. But no machine can handle something for which it has not been programmed.

One minute.

Suppose . . . ?

He rose against the straps, reaching to unbuckle them. He had to get out of this coffin. Jurgens was only a kid. Anything might happen to him. He'd known of pilots cracking up before this. And he couldn't take the responsibility of the firecracker.

Thirty seconds.

He couldn't see properly. His hands shook so much that the straps resisted ; the buckle jammed.

He had to get out, now, before it was too late.

Fifteen seconds.

" Everything okay, sir ?"

" Sure, darling, sure. Everything's fine." His kind were always rakehells with the women. The girls just loved their

devil-may-care amorous speech. They were the heroes of space. He ought to remember that. Smile. Sure, they were the tough babies, the men who took the flaming ships out into space, through the vasty deeps—what hogwash it all was ! His mind fled in blind panic away from reality.

Ten seconds.

The buckle wouldn't come undone.

Anyway, nine seconds, it was too late now. He couldn't be clear of the ferry before she fired.

Eight seconds.

The pumps were rumbling now like hungry intestines, ravening for fuel. The stench rose like a swampy miasma.

Seven. He slumped back. A red rose bloomed in his head, filling his eyes with the colour of blood. He couldn't feel his feet or his hands.

Six. There was nothing. Only a whimpering fear that curdled in the centre of his mind, waiting, waiting for the impact against his back and thighs.

Five. Ferries had tumbled before. They'd blown. They'd cracked and let out air. Anything could happen.

Just anything . . . Four. All that existed of Johnny Howard now was a tight ball of fear. His breath whistled in his throat ; he didn't hear it.

Three.

Two.

One.

After the blackness he uncurled his mind, layer by layer, section by section. His eyes picked up light. His ears gathered in sound through the plugs and the padding and the phones.

" Everything okay." That was Jurgens. Cool, calm, a little detached, sitting up there in the nose watching all his instruments. Playing with the ship, Jurgens would be, playing with the delicate little touches as a conductor plays on the individual performers in an orchestra. Cajoling them. Drawing from them the perfection of a flawless performance.

Damn Jurgens !

Damn him for his youth, and cocksureness and his quick decisions on right and wrong that came without thought but only through a set of reflex actions trained in a rigid society. Jurgens wouldn't crack. Not yet. Not yet . . . whispered the evil little thought in Howard's mind.

His ears picked up the sounds of the other passengers in the compartment now, around the phone linked through to the nose. He lay in his bath of sweat, his mouth a foul waste of sand, his body coming to life and aching as though steam-rollered. Why did he do this ? Why worry about Lucy and the life they led ; why not cut free from it all and retire to Earth and the farm they'd planned.

Why not ? Whoever heard of a deep space man retiring with a good half of his career before him ? Only the weaklings retired ; only the men who couldn't stand the life, who couldn't make out. Only the refuse gave in.

The stewardess went by, smiling. A woman up front was being sick. Someone else was talking to a neighbour.

" . . . so competent, the ferry pilots. Captain Jurgens is such a sweet boy, like my Edmond, yes, these modern boys are so sure of themselves, so competent . . . "

" . . . competent, that's true. Did you know there's a deep space man in the passenger list ?"

" No !" Pique in the voice. " Is there ?"

" A Captain Howard. Used to be Space Rescue Service. Now he's deep space. So much more adventurous. If I'd my life again, that's where I'd be. Out to the rings of Saturn, the moons of Jupiter. What a life !"

What a life, Howard said to himself. And forced his rake-hell smile as he felt faces turned towards him.

The ferry was rising sweetly now. The anti free-fall pills everyone had taken before blastoff were working well. He didn't feel at all unwell. The woman up front must be allergic, or something.

And he was still alive.

Now there was only the positioning and course matching with the station, and he would be free of Earth's gravity at last. Jurgens was a good pilot. There could be no mistakes now. Once aboard the space station, his mind went on, and courage is mine.

He could not see outside the ferry, of course. Time enough for the eternal wonder of the Earth seen from space and all the stars when he stood in the observation lounge of the station, holding a drink, comfortably in space yet under one gravity and feeling like a pagan emperor reviewing his conquests as the Earth turned under him. Not much more to it, now. The fear could be contained now, controlled, filed and docketted away in his mind.

He wouldn't take the ferry back to Earth now, he wouldn't put himself into the clutches of Earth's hungry gravity again until it was time to retire from space and take up the executive position awaiting him back in Space Rescue Control.

That made him think guiltily of Conway. Space Rescue men were scarce. There weren't many of them. Their training was intense, methodical and thorough ; there had been some difficulty in his own case in transferring to deep space. But he had.

He had. And now he could thumb his nose at Earth and her gravity. Alec Jurgens made a perfect approach and touchdown to the station.

Howard went through the tube into the station, swam across the zero gravity sections into the first radial passage. He dealt with coriolis problems without thought as he made for the rim and the observation lounge. He could see his own ship, a wondrous maze of tubes and bottles and containers girded together, floating off there, shadowing the stars.

Soon, he would be aboard, and heading for the planets.

Captain Riceman, station commander, found him in the lounge.

" Hullo, Riceman. I shan't be taking up your hospitality much longer. A quick short one and then I'm off."

Riceman looked worried. His face was harassed and his uniform jacket unbuttoned.

" Ferry out of Station ten is in trouble," he said without preamble. " She was on an inter-station orbit, had a fuel blowout, and is dropping fast. We have to get a ship to her and take off the passengers right away. She'll drop into the Atlantic, so that's no problem."

The fear, curling up into him—and going.

" That's rough, Riceman. The Rescue Service will handle it, though."

" That's the problem. I've contacted spaceport and they can't put a rescue ship up."

" What ? Why ? I know a rescue pilot is needed, a ferry man is useless . . . "

" That's right." Alec Jurgens was talking now, his young face lumpy and ugly. " I'd volunteer like a shot. But I'm no rescue man. I'm a firecracker man. No rescue training."

The fear curled again, harder, stronger.

" Why can't they put up a rescue ship ?"

" They were short handed. One pilot's ill in hospital. Another is on a service mission to a station leaking air. The stand-by is—unavailable."

" Why ?" But he knew, of course. The fear was choking in him now, throttling him, making his whole body writhe and yet he stood there, smiling, talking, as though nothing was wrong.

" I'll tell you why, Howard." Jurgen's hands were opening and closing slowly. " His name is Bruce Conway."

No ! The voice in his mind screamed in panic, gibbering to be away from here, out in his ship, smoothly sailing towards Mars without any problems, with no fear—*without fear.*

" I understand," he said. The words were full and strong despite the dryness of his mouth.

" You'll take the ship, Captain Howard ?" asked Riceman. " You're the only qualified pilot here. If you take the rocket now and leave at once, you can match orbits with ferry ten and take off the passengers. The pilot was killed, I'm afraid."

" That makes it just that more difficult," he said. He put that rakehell smile on his face. " A tough one."

" You rescue men are trained for that."

He could refuse, of course.

He could say to them, staring at him : " Sorry, gentlemen. Sorry. But I'm a deep space man now. I quit the rescue service because—because I was afraid. I don't have to take your firecracker out and match orbits with a falling ferry and take off the passengers, with no one aboard the wreck to help me. I don't have to fight the fear, and the sense of pressure, the little things that can go wrong. I don't have to risk my life. I don't have to plunge back into Earth's hungry gravity and feel the fear drying my mouth and sweating up my vision, feel the guts in me contract until I have to bite down hard to stop from screaming aloud. No ! Sorry. I'm not going."

He could say that, of course.

He looked at Alec Jurgens. He said to Captain Riceman : " I'm on my way now. Signal me course details aboard the firecracker." He laughed, putting on the big spaceman hero act.

" It'll be a nice change to handle one of the old fireball expresses again."

Kenneth Bulmer

What do you do when fear, loathing and hatred dominate the life of a community ? Especially when na man is prepared ta da anything abaut it ! But, a boy, perhaps. would hove more courage—or recklessness . . .

BADMAN

by JOHN BRUNNER

First it was a rumour, and men looked politely incredulous, but nonetheless they managed, somehow, most of them, to think up excuses for going home early from work to be on the safe side.

Then it was a whisper, and the citizens looked apprehensively both ways before crossing the road, and began to draw aside from their neighbours and talk in low voices.

Then it was a certainty, and mothers called their children in from the streets. Shutters went up in front of the shops ; people parked their cars and went indoors, or decided—those of them that could—to visit long-forgotten relations in the next town.

At last it was a shout, and in the silence of the town running at dead slow, it could be heard to take on words.

" The Badman is coming !"

In the schools, teachers explained it to their pupils, and let them go home early, but the children did not run and shout when they were unexpectedly released. They went home quietly, through back streets.

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In the business houses, deals were abandoned and traders left their wares unprotected, forgetting to worry for the safety of their goods in concern for their own.

In the nurseries, mothers hushed their babies into a dry-eyed silence with the threat of the awesome name.

In the bakeries, the ovens were turned low ; in the workshops, soldering irons grew cold on the benches ; in the factories, machines idled to a halt ; in the power station the dampers were eased into the pile as the load gradually slackened.

In the mayor's parlour, grim-faced men set up outside TV cameras, and Mayor Andray himself cleared his throat nervously, waiting for the red light to show he was on the air.

" *The Badman is coming* !"

In secret places men gathered to speak circumspectly, to hunt through their vocabularies for choice—but inadequate—vituperation. They looked about them nervously before they uttered the words, and punctuated them by spitting forcefully on the ground. Some of them clenched their fists ; others raised their arms in gesture indicative of holding a gun, and their friends nodded approvingly. But that was only for the moment.

Eventually, one after another, some of them remembered things they had to do, and slipped away, and the remainder, who had not wanted to show cowardice in front of friends, cursed them also to hide their relief at being able to depart under cover of being abandoned by their allies. Soon there were none left.

" *THE BADMAN IS COMING* !"

Citizens searched their consciences, fearful lest they should have put off making amends for an injury done to someone, and risk being denounced to the terrible visitor. The phone exchange was violently busy for the best part of an hour as uneasy callers rang to acknowledge debts that might have been thought forgotten, to admit and ask forgiveness for unkindnesses said or done. These conversations were hesitant, conducted through implications rather than words ; it would not be advisable to admit one suspected a friend of being capable of denouncing others.

And that was nearly the last sign. The town was quiet. It seemed to have crouched in on itself, curled up, lying in wait

—as a defenceless animal, having expended its strength in running, may abandon all hope of survival and offer itself to its pursuer in the hope of a quick and painless end.

Niles Boden was one of those who returned home quickly and quietly when the schools were closed. He let himself into his home with as little noise as possible, hoping to escape notice. But his father was already home from the atomic power station and nodded to him as he passed across the hall where Niles was hanging up his outdoor coat before going into the lounge.

Niles listened to the familiar voice which drifted through the lounge door. It had a ring of controlled terror which sat oddly on its usual oily ingratiation. One of the regular announcers from the local TV station, saying something about interrupting the scheduled programme for a special message from the Mayor.

Might as well make sure it isn't just a gutter rumour, decided Niles reluctantly. He threw his schoolbooks down all anyhow and ran after his father just in time to hear the announcer say, " People of Greenstown, Mayor Nicholas Andray !"

In the dim lounge, Niles found himself a spot on the floor between his mother, who was comforting six-year-old Robin, and his sister May, rising eleven. May had just been old enough to remember the last visit of the Badman to Greenstown, and she was full of nameless fears ; she kept plucking her lip with her fingers as if to stop herself bursting into tears. Niles felt a slight surge of contempt from the vantage point of his own sixteen years. He could remember two previous visits, for they came at random intervals.

He sneaked a glance at his father, who sat chewing his pipe in an armchair facing the screen. The anger in his face was big and terrible, and good to see. *But why the hell*, asked Niles silently, *since everybody gets so angry, doesn't somebody do something about it* ?

The mayor was on screen now. He seemed to have difficulty choosing his words. He got as far as, " Citizens of Greenstown—" and had to pause and reflect. At last he plunged on.

" There have been rumours that we are to have a visit from—from the person popularly known as the Badman. In order to quiet the very natural anxiety caused by these rumours, I am making this special announcement. The—the Badman *is* due."

Niles heard his mother draw in her breath sharply. The sound alarmed Robin, and he whimpered.

So this is it, Niles thought. And found himself shivering.

The mayor talked for ten minutes, saying nothing in a tone of reassurance. He made the usual pleas for maintenance of law and order, and for citizens to keep to their homes, and if they did go out to watch the Badman pass, for them to refrain from—

And so on.

When he had heard enough, Niles began to edge silently towards the door, hoping to leave the room unnoticed, but May happened to catch the movement from the corner of her eye, and turned.

" Niles, where are you going ?" she demanded hysterically.

His mother and father looked at him wordlessly.

" Uh—I'm going over to Sarah's," said Niles. " I—I think I'd like to be with her."

" Who's Sarah ?" his father inquired.

" You know." Niles felt himself blushing, and controlled the spasm with an effort—he did not like to lie to his parents and was always bad at it. " The girl I'm taking to the end of term dance."

" Niles Boden, you are not to leave this house !" said his mother. " To think of going half across town at a time like this !"

" Let him go," said his father quietly. " He'll be all right. After all, he's sensible enough to look after himself, and I shouldn't think the Badman will be in town before three o'clock. He'll have plenty of time."

He used the hand holding his pipe to screen a man-to-man wink at Niles from his wife, and Niles felt even worse.

" Well—all right," said his mother grudgingly. " But promise you'll take care. Run all the way, and if you hear the Badman coming, get out of sight."

" There are always some idiots out on the streets to see him go by," his father said. " They don't come to any harm if they behave themselves."

Niles seized his chance, and the door shut behind him with a slam.

He didn't stop for his coat, but ran out of the house and down the path as he was, his heart pounding. *Damn it*, he

told himself as he crossed the deserted avenue and headed for the rendezvous, *that's made me late. I shouldn't have gone home.*

But then his parents would have been far more worried—they might even have asked the police to look for him. And if they'd found him, that would have wrecked everything . . .

After that he stopped thinking, until a quarter of an hour later when he ran down a narrow back street and came to a panting halt before a warehouse door. He rapped on it three times and waited.

After a few seconds it opened a crack.

" It's me, Don," said Niles in a whisper, and the door swung right back to let him through into darkness.

" Thought you were never going to get here," said a soft voice, and a hand clapped him on the shoulder.

" I got held up at home. The rest of the gang here ?"

" Everyone else except Roger. He called me up yesterday to say he was laid up with a busted toe. We're not expecting him." As he spoke, Don was walking forward through the gloom, and now they rounded the corner of one of the stacks of salt-bags which filled the warehouse and found a patch of light. Four boys of Niles's age were crouched down around a candle and talking in low tones.

" Here he is, fellers," said Don. " Told you Niles wouldn't be yellow."

Niles explained briefly what had happened. Then he passed his tongue over his lips and asked the burning question.

" Have we settled who it's to be yet ?"

Brian, who was bent with his ear close to a radio turned down very low, shook his head. " Waiting for you to show up," he answered. " We still don't know which way the Badman's coming."

" Got the cards, Alfie ?" said Don. Alfie nodded, reaching into his pocket. He produced some dog-eared playing cards and began to riffle them with his fingers.

" Hold it !" said Brian suddenly, and cautiously turned up the volume of the radio. The tinny voice said, "—is now in sight of Greenstown along the Westerby road. Stay tuned to this wavelength. We will give a commentary—"

Brian turned down the volume again. " Westerby road," he said thoughtfully. " That means he'll come in through Grand and High and turn north on to Main before he hits the crowds. That is, if he's headed for the town hall."

" He always has done before," said Maurice from the shadows. He was Mayor Andray's son, and knew what he was talking about.

" That makes it Location Three, doesn't it?" Alfie commented, and the others nodded. They had planned this till any one of them could have recited their five alternative schemes from memory.

" Let's get it over with !" said the last member of the group, Harry, who had not spoken since Niles's arrival. There was a shrill hint of hysteria in his tone, and Niles found himself hoping that the lot would not fall on Harry nearly as strongly as he hoped it would not fall on himself.

Alfie gave the cards one final flip. " High man does the job," he said succinctly. " Low man is the getaway man. Okay ? "

In response to answering nods, he began to deal around the circle. Brian got an eight and held it for the others to see. Maurice had a four, and when Don, white-faced, found a three, breathed an audible sigh of relief. Harry drew another eight and tossed it face up into the candle-light. Then it was Niles's turn—and he drew a king.

He felt suddenly sick and afraid—but there was one more chance. Hopefully, he looked at Alfie.

" Seems to be you and Don, Niles," said the latter sympathetically. " Here, you deal me mine, will you ?"

Hands shaking, Niles took the greasy cards and flipped one at random towards Alfie. It was a ten.

" Okay," he said at last into the stillness. " Don, let's go."

" Here's your little toy," said Alfie, digging again into his capacious pockets and holding out what looked like an ordinary rubber ball. But it weighed very heavy, and when it was squeezed one could feel a hardness in its core.

" It'll be just too bad if we've picked the one dud in the box," he said with an attempt at gallows humour. " But—luck, you two. Better get moving."

They all stood up, Brian turning off the radio as he did so, and one by one shook hands with Niles and Don, wishing them good luck but plainly very glad to be out of it themselves. Then they filed out of the warehouse. Alfie, the last to go, pinched out the candle end and put it in his pocket with the cards.

When Niles emerged into the light, Maurice was running out of the street ; Brian and Harry were nowhere to be seen, but Don was standing astride the waiting motorcycle. Niles stuffed the ball into his own pocket, wishing he had put a coat on after all—it would have been easier to hide the ball —and climbed on the pillion. Don kicked the starter, and the engine came to life with a subdued roar.

They passed Alfie at the end of the street, and he waved. Niles, clinging with his knees to the rapidly accelerating machine, essayed a sick smile in answer, but it wasn't much of a success.

They did not talk during the journey. Don concentrated on weaving through the back alleys which would take them to their destination—one of the shops overlooking the High Street, under whose windows the Badman would assuredly pass. Back alleys were not for him.

Niles could not help thinking of Alfie's remark about a dud, but he squeezed the hard core of the rubber ball in his pocket and remembered the time they had run the live test.

It had been the blindest piece of luck, finding the old corroded box in the scrap yard outside town. If it hadn't been so heavy, they might never have paid it attention, but they had opened it cautiously and found it held five of an original batch of six hand grenades. And with the discovery had come the plan.

Someone *had* to do something about the Badman ! Everyone hated him—when his name was mentioned people cursed it, spitting in the gutter. Mothers frightened erring children by threatening with him. The mayor, forced by his position to be polite, had to say the popular title with an affected air of disclaimer, but his son Maurice had asserted a thousand times that Mayor Andray really hated him worse than anybody. But somehow, they feared him more than they hated him—and no one did anything at all.

They had not known what they had found, at first. But the instructions inside the lid of the box were explicit, and they had seen the possibilities at once. They had sneaked the little bombs home, cleaned and polished them, gingerly checked the firing mechanism as well as they could without daring to disassemble them. They had a bad couple of days while Niles found out what the effective life of their contents was

likely to be by devious questioning of his father, who worked in the power station, and knew about such things.

Finally, they had taken one of them along when they went into the hills on a fishing trip, and let it off on the site of the Old Town, among the ruins, out of sight and sound of Greenstown. It worked all right—it worked wonderfully. So well that they had to spend their " fishing trip " shovelling earth into the ten-foot crater for fear someone might see it was freshly made.

Remembering that test explosion, Niles felt comforted. The one he carried wouldn't be a dud !

But it was also heartening to know that Brian, Alfie and Don each possessed a carefully hidden duplicate of this bomb —just in case. If today's attempt failed, there would always be another visit.

In another back alley, this time just off the High Street, Don ran the motorcycle into shadow and stopped it. Niles was glad to release his cramped hold and get off.

" Luck, boy !" said Don softly. " And don't take your time on the way back, will you ?"

Niles nodded. They had made it a condition by mutual agreement that if the actual grenade-thrower was caught, the getaway man should save himself, not wait until things were hopeless.

His mouth was too dry to speak. He hesitated a moment. Then, without a backward glance, he ran forward and seized the bottom rung of the fire escape on the side of the building, which came to about seven feet from the ground. He swung himself up and ran up the stairs, followed by a metallic thunder from his pounding feet. He blessed the fear which kept most people at home when the Badman was due.

From the roof of this building to the next—the one he wanted—would only be a jump. He looked down into the street before showing himself. There were a few foolhardy souls waiting to stare at the Badman when he passed. None of them was looking upwards.

He jumped, ran across the roof, and prised open the skylight through which he had to pass. Inside, the shop was empty—closed like all the others in town by the Badman's visit. He lowered himself to the full stretch of his arms, let go, and landed quietly on a heavy-piled carpet.

These were the offices ; the sales departments were on the bottom two floors. He pulled a table across the room and placed it under the skylight, so that he would be able to return the way he had come, and then looked around, remembering.

He had only been here once before, when they were spying out the land for what they baptised Location Three—they had to explore stealthily, by night. But he recalled where the stairs were, and swiftly made his way down into the shop.

He ensconced himself in the clothing department, beside a window overlooking the street which yielded to gentle tugging. Here he commanded a good view of the approaches. In all probability, no one would notice him, and even if one of the ten or a dozen watchers glaring along the road were to look up, they would not remark on him. The pall of lethargic despair hanging over the town would see to that.

But he was only just in time.

Far out along the Westerby road, he could see the cloud of dust and smoke made by the outriders on their powerful motorcycles, travelling in the wedge-formation which left no room for anything else on the road. He felt sour, blinding hatred rise inside him.

They would slow down from their thunderous pace through the country to about fifteen or twenty miles an hour to pass through the town, and Niles concentrated on recalling the way they had practised for hours on end, throwing stones at the front wheel of their motorcycle as one or another rode it past at steadily increasing speed. In the end they had all been hitting the ground under its front wheel ten times out of ten.

A girl on the other side of the street—a washy blonde—let out a sudden scream of pure hatred at the oncoming men, and her escort clapped his hand over her mouth in horror. The rest of the small group of watchers twitched nervously at the noise, starting to look over their shoulders and seeming afraid to complete the movement. The blonde started to sob with her face on her companion's shoulder.

That was the sort of thing they had to put a stop to. Nameless terror—deep-seated, all pervading fear and loathing. Niles set his mouth in a grim line and took out the grenade, laying it on the window ledge to strip off the concealing rubber.

Then he gripped it as they had so often practised, ready to extract the firing pin.

The sound of the approaching cavalcade rose to a roar. The first outrider swung into the High Street, followed by two side by side, then three, then four, and at last five, in the familiar flying wedge. It brought back sudden memories of how he had used to play Badman and Citizens with the other kids along the street when he was eight or ten years old.

The outriders all seemed to be squat, ugly men. Their faces were masked by thick tinted perspex visors ; they wore black metal helmets which protected their skulls, and black nylon bullet-proof armour covered their bodies. They had light machine-guns slung on their shoulders ; revolvers in slick patent leather holsters glistened wetly at their hips. Even their machines seemed designed for sudden violence. Throttled back into low gear, their four-cylinder engines made a unison noise like distant thunder, and the handlebars were enclosed behind high armoured-glass shields.

They looked neither to right nor left as they rolled down the street. The watchers' faces were stony, but the aura of hate which surrounded them was almost tangible. The blonde girl who had cried out raised tear-swollen eyes and gazed mutely at the visitors.

Then the outriders were past, and he could see the car. That was black, too, and armoured. The top was transparent, but he knew it was tough—enough people had tried to shoot the Badman in his time to have tested its strength.

But a grenade and a bullet were two different things.

He had time to take in the appearance of the car—to see the visored man with a raised machine-gun sitting beside the driver, and the black-clothed postilions who looked menacingly down from the running-boards, revolvers ready in their free hands. He could not quite glimpse the Badman himself, but he knew he was there, in the rear seat.

Now ! he thought, and with the thought came the action. The firing pin was out, and he had launched the bomb into the road between the last of the outriders and the nose of the car. For one frightful moment he thought it was going to roll, but it dropped fair, and the case did not crack on the hard paving. The front of the car was about to pass over it when he turned and ran.

He wanted to stay and see the result, but he dared not. If he was not back in the alley within seconds of the explosion, Don would ride off as they had insisted and save his own skin.

Up the stairs—on to the table under the skylight—out to the roof. He did not glance aside as he jumped the gap to the next building and ran for the fire escape. The steel steps rang again under his feet as he desperately fled down them.

He was at the third landing—the next-to-last—when he realised with a pang of dismay that he had not heard the grenade go off.

Don's white face looked up at him from the saddle of the waiting motorcycle, asking a mute horrified question. Niles could not answer. He scrambled down the last few steps and dropped awkwardly to the ground.

Then he heard a roar, and looked up to see two things : Don's machine first, racing out of the alleyway to lose itself in back streets—and a blind-seeming, visored man in black standing over him, machine-gun at the ready.

The man did not say anything. After a while, Niles slowly raised his hands.

It was a walk of almost a hundred yards to bring them out into the High Street. By the time the distance was covered, Niles' stunned mind was functioning again, and he looked about him to see what had happened. The spectators had melted away like snow in summer, and the big car—the Badman's car—had halted a few yards down the street. Men in black seemed to be everywhere. One of them was holding—very gingerly—the grenade Niles had thrown, and he wondered numbly why it had not gone off.

His escort jabbed him with the muzzle of his gun, forcing him over towards the car. Niles obeyed. It was not until he was within a few feet of the vehicle that he saw, gazing fixedly at him through the perspex, the face of the best-known and most hated man in the country. For the first time he looked directly into the eyes of the man whose nickname was as familiar to him as the names of his own family, noting black brows, flattened nose, thick neck.

His escort allowed him to halt, but when Niles glanced about him he saw that it was foolish to think of running. The blind-looking visors were turned on him from every side, and hands hovered ready to shoot him down without compunction if he showed signs of moving. He wondered what they would do to him. Torture him, probably ; kill him, for sure.

The black-browed face was inspecting him through the plastic. " So that's the one !" said a booming voice from a loudspeaker set in the side of the car. " Why, he's a mere child."

" A pretty deadly kind of child," said Niles's escort. "What do I do with him ?"

" Push him inside."

The door of the vehicle opened, and to Niles's astonishment he found himself being prodded into the front seat beside the driver, who looked incuriously at him. He realised that the man who had captured him was the man who had been riding in the car before.

He sat rigidly, conscious of the black eyes of the Badman boring into his neck, while his escort also crowded into the front seat beside him. The booming loudspeaker voice gave orders for the cortege to reform and carry on. One by one the motorcyclists took up their positions and roared away again ; then the car purred into life and the driver sent it rolling down the street.

The rumour of an attempt on the Badman's life must have gone ahead of them. Main Street, their next thoroughfare, was usually the most crowded of any street in town during a Badman's visit. Today it was bare of people, except for a few semi-lunatics who raised fists and shouted insults as the car went by. A member of the escort behind them pulled over to one of the louder and lewder of the shouters, Niles saw in the rear-view mirror, but he failed to get a glimpse of what was done to the offender. He shivered, and the escort cramped beside him in the front seat hinted with the barrel of his gun that he had better remain still.

The procession roared up Main Street and pulled up in front of the town hall. Here on the steps waited the mayor and councillors ; at the Badman's approach they carefully composed their faces into something less than loathing. Their forced composure was broken, though, by the sight of the prisoner in the car.

As soon as the vehicle halted, the mayor came down the steps to make a speech of greeting, but the Badman leapt from his seat and cut him short.

" Andray, this boy here tried to kill me as I came down High Street. I shall demand an accounting !"

Niles saw delight struggle with righteous horror in the mayor's face. He began to babble apologies, but the Badman ignored them and stalked up the steps into the building, letting the councillors straggle after him.

" Out," said Niles's escort coldly, and Niles obeyed. One of the outriders left his machine and fell in on the other side of Niles, gun drawn. Thus sandwiched between his captors, he went into the town hall.

He had never been here before, but Maurice Andray had given many descriptions of the layout when the group was considering where best to attempt the assassination, and although they had discarded the town hall as too risky, Niles remembered what his friend had told him. When he was taken past the council chambers and led upstairs in the Badman's wake, he knew they were headed for the mayor's parlour.

" Inside," said his escort when they reached the door. His vocabulary seemed confined to one-word commands.

In the parlour itself, worried councillors were obsequiously trying to make amends to the Badman, who stood leaning against the far wall with his face like thunder. As soon as Niles was brought in, he bellowed at the assembly to make themselves scarce, and everyone except Mayor Andray, the Badman himself, and Niles and his two guards, shuffled hastily out of the room. The Badman watched them go, scowling.

Niles waited numbly until the door was closed.

Then the mayor's worry seemed to drop from him like a garment. He crossed the floor in five swift strides to shake the Badman's hand. " Well, Jack, you old so-and-so !" he exclaimed. " Good to see you again !"

And—incredibly—the Badman smiled and returned the handshake. " Same to you, Nick," he said. " I see you're still breeding 'em as hot-headed as ever."

Andray turned and took a good look at Niles for the first time. " Why, of course !" he said. " You're one of Maurice's friends, aren't you ? Wait a moment—Borden ? No—Niles Boden, isn't that right ?"

Niles nodded and licked his lips.

" You can stop the play-acting, Raistrick," said the Badman. " Get the kid a chair."

Head whirling, Niles looked at his guards. They had pushed up their visors to reveal grinning faces : one—Raistrick—

freckled and sandy-haired, the other sunburned, with a curl of brown wandering across his forehead from under his helmet. Niles felt himself being thrust into a chair.

"What actually happened?" Mayor Andray went on. "Surely he wasn't dumb enough to use a gun?"

In the act of lighting a cigarette, the Badman jerked a thumb at Niles. "He dropped a grenade under the car from a shop window in the High Street. Lord knows where he got it from. It wasn't a dud, either. If Macartney hadn't slapped the nullifier on it before it had a chance to disrupt, you'd have been looking for a new man for the job."

Niles was too sick at the thought of the mayor proving to be a traitor to pay much attention to the conversation. Memories of Maurice's assertions about his father rang mockingly in his mind. Hated the Badman worse than anybody! The two were hand-in-glove!

Mayor Andray chuckled. "Takes me back," he said. "Remember my time? Over in Chatley, when I tried to shoot Armitage, who was holding down the Badman's chair for the west. You were one of the outriders in his team, then."

"That's right. Twenty-four years ago—or is it twenty-five?"

"All of that. Of course, people hadn't learnt then that it was useless to shoot at a Badman. They're more advanced now." He eyed Niles thoughtfully. "An atomic grenade, eh? I'd not have thought there were any left."

The Badman blew a long thin plume of smoke. "The world had an awful lot of weapons," he said sombrely. "And two hundred years is a damned short time to dispose of them all."

"I suppose so," sighed Andray. "Now, boy"—this to Niles—"I expect you want to know what all this is about?"

It was slowly coming home to Niles that maybe he wasn't going to be tortured after all. Maybe he was even going to get out of it alive. He still could not quite believe that the Badman, whom he had been taught from birth to hate and fear, was not so terrible as he had been told, but he found it easier to trust the mayor, whom he knew also as Maurice's father. He found his tongue long enough to answer yes to Andray's question.

The Badman dropped into a seat and looked at Niles with a serious expression. "What do you know about war?" he said abruptly.

Niles hesitated. " Well . . ." he began reluctantly. "Just what we were taught in school, I guess. It was when people fought against the—the Badmen. It was a long time ago, maybe two hundred years, and most of the stories about it are mythological." He stumbled a little over the last word.

After a moment's silence, the Badman looked at Andray with a twinkle in his eye. " You're doing a damned good job here in Greenstown if that's all he knows," he said.

Andray smiled faintly. " We do our best," he said. Turning to Niles again, he inquired, " And where do the Badmen come from ?"

" Nobody knows," said Niles, bewildered. Then in a rush, " Some people think they've *always* been here."

" And why do you hate them ?"

" Because they're *bad*," said Niles in puzzlement.

" You see ?" said Andray, glancing at the Badman. "We're getting places, aren't we ? No identification with national or ideological groups, or minorities, or what have you. When you picked me up, I still had my head stuffed with that kind of nonsense. We've scotched that.

" Niles, I'm sorry to have to tell you this—but what you learned in school just isn't true. There wasn't just one war, there were hundreds. And none of them were fought against the Badmen."

Niles sat bolt upright, gaping.

" There were a *lot* of wars," Andray continued, oblivious of the boy's stare. " Not just hundreds of people were killed, or even thousands. *Millions* died. You know what a million is?"

" Of course !" said Niles blankly. " But—well, there can't be a million people in Greenstown and Westerby put together !"

" That's right. Never more than a hundred thousand people in any one town. You probably accept that as a sort of natural law, but it isn't. It's a rule we imposed. Once, there were cities with five, even ten millions.

" You know about atomic power, of course. I think your father works in the power station, doesn't he ? You know how dangerous it can be. About two hundred years ago two lots of people let loose bombs on each other—not just hand grenades, but big ones, capable of levelling a hundred square miles. They destroyed practically all the cities and killed millions of men and women. You've probably heard that the Old Town was burnt down. It wasn't—it was blown up by one of the bombs. How do you feel about that ?"

" But people couldn't be that cruel !" objected Niles. "Not unless they were all Badmen !"

" Oh no," contradicted the Badman. " They could be so cruel. They couldn't learn the difference between an ordinary quarrel and a war which killed whole towns full of people. They seemed to need something to be afraid of, to band together against—"

" So when it was all over and there was practically nothing left," Andray supplied, " they decided they couldn't let it happen again. Hence—" He gestured at the Badman.

The Badman stubbed out his cigarette. " When have you actually known a Badman or his followers hurt anyone ?" he asked.

Niles stumble-tongued. " Why—"

" Exactly. You've only been *told* about the awful things we do. You've been brought up—we call it ' conditioned '—to fear and loathe the Badman. He's a symbol of all the horrible things human beings are capable of. The Badman is evil in person, isn't he ? Schoolchildren whisper stories of how we eat babies for breakfast ; grown men, with a life-time of it behind them, detest us because they've got used to it—and consequently they'd be *ashamed* to behave to other people the way a Badman is supposed to behave. That's what makes us important. When you hate a Badman, you don't hate some person because of something he's done to you. You hate cruelty."

" What did you do to get into this line, Raistrick ?" Andray inquired.

The sandy-haired man grinned. " I sneaked into the town hall back home and eavesdropped on a meeting between the mayor and the local Badman. I was picked up later for spreading slanderous rumours. How about you, Hollins ?"

The other guard smiled reminiscently. " Me, I actually managed to wreck a Badman's car. Some pals of mine and I sawed through the struts of a bridge he had to cross."

" Welcome to the band if brothers," said Raistrick dryly.

" You mean me ?" said Niles.

" Oh yes !" The Badman smiled. His face seemed much less foreboding now. " We can't let you get away with this, you know. We have to preserve the legend of the Badman's badness. I'm afraid we can't even let your family know you're still alive. It's always hard on a new recruit, but anyone who

has the determination to take action against the personification of evil *has* to be on our side. *Has* to. You've started young. But Raistrick started younger, and he stood it all right. You have a pretty good chance of getting to be a Badman yourself, or if it's more in your line you may follow Nick Andray here and get planted in a town somewhere to be elected mayor."

" But—you mean I can't even say goodbye to my folks ?" Niles saw the room suddenly swim ; his eyes stung, and he knew they were filling with tears, but he stopped himself from wiping them away.

" I'm sorry." The Badman's face went stony. " But it's of your own doing. We're playing for something a deal too big to let personal matters influence us. Remember, you attempted a crime of violence—from a good motive, certainly, but still a crime. You were prepared to kill or injure not just myself or my guards, but innocent bystanders on the roadside. You hadn't thought of it that way, maybe. But isn't it so ?"

Niles stared at the floor.

" So here's your punishment—and be thankful it isn't what you expected." The Badman got to his feet. "All right—let's go."

Niles saw through his haze of despair that Raistrick and Hollins had snapped down their visors and become again the impersonal instruments of evil. The Badman had adopted his customary cruel expression, and the mayor was as frightened and subservient as before. Now that he knew it was not real, though, Niles began to feel a stir of understanding.

He was taken out of the building and seated again in the front of the big car with Raistrick beside him—a symbol and a warning to the sullenly watching citizens, on his way so far as they knew to a frightful and tormented end.

The cavalcade got on the move again, out through the streets, to strike the fear of evil into the next small town along the route. Strangely, Niles found that he did not really feel much regret when he saw the outskirts of his home town disappear and they headed up into the hills. There had been a kind of dedication in what the Badman had said . . .

He twisted his head to look at the Badman, and the mask of cruelty slipped a little in a cheerful wink.

Niles looked forward through the windscreen again. Little by little he found he was able to smile.

John Brunner

You might well ask "What does an old comet or two amount to amongst astronomical friends?" In fact, quite a lot, and astronomers are constantly learning new facts about the Sun by careful observations of these wandering solar visitors.

TELL-TAIL

by KENNETH JOHNS

Physicists and astronomers have long been intrigued by the millions of miles long tails of comets that outrival the planets and stars in the blaze of their ghostly splendour, yet are tenuous enough for stars to be seen through their diaphanous veils. Comets, to the superstitious, meant only portents of disaster ; today they are an important branch of scientific enquiry and the study of cometary tails has assumed a significance undreamed of when men and horses bolted in panic stricken flight at the spectral glimmer in the sky.

Many years were needed to define the true place of comets in the natural order ; from whirls of fiery air a few miles above the surface of the Earth, they were gradually pushed further and further into space until it was recognised that they are the

wanderers of space, visiting the Sun on periods of inspection—only to swing around and go hurtling off into outer darkness once again.

Since it is rare for the nuclei of comets to exceed a diameter of ten miles and the tails are only developed when nuclei fall within the orbit of Mars, solar heating plays an important part in the formation of cometary tails. As is well known, the tails point directly away from the Sun, and for a long time astronomers assumed that this was a result of light pressure from the Sun. The reality of the pressure created by photons can easily be demonstrated in the laboratory.

Today, however, quantitative measurements and careful observations show that there are three types of comets' tails and one at least of these cannot be formed by light pressure alone.

Type I comet tails are built up of long thin streamers showing a complex internal structure. The spectra of these show the presence of ionised molecules such as carbon monoxide and nitrogen—similar to the terrestrial molecules found in our atmosphere—but ones which have been damaged by the forcible knocking off of one of their electrons. This damage could be caused by high temperatures or ionising radiation such as ultraviolet light, X-rays and fast-moving particles. It is unlikely to be heat since the molecules are probably composed of ice in which is dissolved gases, the gases being released by melting and boiling off of the ice.

The nucleus of a comet is not a solid mass but a loosely held together drift of ice crystals and metallic particles that has gradually grown in the frigid wastelands far from any star.

When such an aggregate approaches the Sun, its surface is warmed and boils off to create a very thin atmosphere a few thousand miles in diameter. This atmosphere is quickly blasted by the Sun's outpouring radiation and, since the comet's gravitational field is far too weak to hold onto the gases, they are torn away to accelerate out of the Solar System.

This acceleration is the distinguishing feature of Type I tails, moving away from the Sun at from 200 to 2000 times the solar inspired acceleration of the inwardly drawn nucleus. It was the the magnitude of this acceleration that led astronomers to realise that this was far more than could be explained by light pressure alone.

Instead of the pressure of electromagnetic waves, the forcing agency turned out to be the solid particles emitted by the Sun, the thin spray of hydrogen ejected from the whole of the solar surface, more vigorously from sunspot regions and with fantastic violence from solar flares. This is not hydrogen in the form of the gas we know as the lighter-than-air filling for balloons ; but a plasma composed of separate hydrogen nuclei and electrons in equal proportions. Torn from one another by the Sun's heat, they still contain too much energy to combine, even in space, and neutralise each others' opposite electrical charges.

So they all hurtle outward and rush as a thin but viscous current for the comet to breast. Several hundred thousand of these particles per second collide with every square inch of the face of the comet turned toward the Sun.

Molecules of the comets' atmosphere ionised by the solar ultraviolet light have positive charges and are thrust back by the thin solar wind at ever increasing speeds. Complex magnetic fields built up by the moving charged ions interact and help intensify the accelerations and force the ions into helical paths so that the tail does not broaden as it stretches out in a luminous finger pointing at the black reaches beyond the orbit of Pluto.

Moving at 1,000 miles a second, plasma from the Sun would take about a day to reach the Earth, and this is the time interval actually noted between disturbances on the Sun and magnetic variations on the Earth. More recently it has been shown that solar flares send out sprays of plasma at a third of the speed of light. Certainly there is enough energy in the plasma spray to account for comets' tails.

These plasma sprays are not constant in intensity, being bunched up into funnel-like sprays that sweep around the solar system as the Sun rotates. To us it appears as if the Sun's rotational period is 27 days ; whilst, to possible observers among the stars, the Sun makes one revolution every 25 days. To an observer on a comet the rotational period would be a little or more or less according to which way around the comet was orbiting the Sun.

Observations have shown that comets become brighter when there is intense activity on the Sun's surface but this may be due just to the increased solar output of ultraviolet light. But a long series of measurements made of the acceleration of the

ions in comets' tails shows that the acceleration increases enormously at about the time when a strong plasma beam—detected by its effect as it sweeps over the Earth—should envelope a comet.

Two other types of comets' tails have been recognised: Types II and III. These are characterised by backward accelerations a little greater and a little less than forward acceleration due to the Sun's gravity. These result in curved tails, often a Type I tail and a Type II or III tail being present in the same comet at the same time. The Types II and III tails do not show ionised spectra and so are probably composed of small dust particles and their accelerations are small enough to be accounted for by light pressure alone.

Whilst we can no longer glibly say that a comet's tail always points away from the Sun, the object that caused this breakdown of an old saw in itself was not comparable with the true streaming, magnificent, millions of miles long tails which do always point away from the Sun. When Arend-Roland comet became visible to the naked eye in April, 1957 many uninformed were disappointed, expecting one of the heavenly visitations of brilliant comets which were common in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Long exposure photography was required to show the spike extending from the nose of the comet, pointing directly *towards* the Sun.

This forward projecting spike was unique in astronomical research and set the scientific dovecotes fluttering with theories to account for it.

And, of course, other, earlier, comets may have possesed this untypical forward-projecting tail which would not have been seen by the naked eye and which could only be detected visually by long-exposure photography.

So far, the only authentic samples of cometary debris that we actually have are six tiny iron meteorites only a 6000th of an inch in diameter found in 1946 after a disintegrated comet burned itself out as a meteor shower in Earth's atmosphere. These are a mere fraction of the dust particles that must have impregnated the cometary crystals of ice during their formation.

Certainty as to the structure of comets and their tails must await the first ship that will cautiously match its orbit and velocity with that of a comet and extend delicate grapnels cooled to near absolute zero to grab a sample of comet and

transfer it to a deep-freeze container. The reality will be a far cry from those deplorable films showing red-hot comets and meteors rushing through space with a roaring racket like the Flying Scotsman screaming through a tunnel.

Matching course with a comet will be an exhilarating experience—one interesting problem will be in exactly determining when the ship is in space and when it is in the comet. But the lure on mens' imaginations—the sayings of doom, the scares, the portents of disaster—will still have power sufficient to make men of the future go out and capture a comet or pieces of the head. Then and only then can we say that we have a true sample of cometary material, the material left between the stars when the stars and planets were formed.

Kenneth Johns

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Two novelettes have the feature position next month—" The Jarnos Affair," another one of Lan Wright's ' Johnny Dawson ' stories in which Dawson (as usual) receives the dirty end of the stick from Hendrix, his boss in the Space Commission —and " The Fourth Power," a fascinating excursion into the realm of mind control by John Brunner. Plus short stories and features as yet not finally decided.

Part Two of Brian Aldiss's new serial finds Gary Towler in even greater trouble with the chances of exposing Par-Chavorlem's corruption even more remote.

And a very fine and unusual cover painting by new artist Jarr.

Story ratings for No. 88 were :—

1. The Waiting Grounds - - - - - J. G. Ballard
2. Grapeliner - - - - - - - James White
3. Aberration - Roy Robinson and J. A. Sones
4. I Like You - - - - - George Longdon
   Almost Obsolete - - - - Donald Malcolm

Australian author Wynne Whiteford, who has had several highly successful long stories in our companion magazine Science Fiction Adventures, *makes his debut in* New Worlds *with an extremely interesting short story about the perils of trading on alien planets.*

BILL OF SALE

by WYNNE H. WHITEFORD

The landing conditions were the worst either Grange or Hollen had ever seen—a wild sky full of wind-shredded grey cloud that raced at level beneath level almost down to the leaden sea.

"Take it steady!" Hollen hardly recognised the sound of his own strained voice. "The damned island's only a mile wide."

"Shut up!" Grange's shout was the crack of a whip. "Think I don't know that?"

Hollen opened his mouth for an angry reply, then thought better of it. Big enough chance of a crack-up already. Better not add to it by verbal bickering. He pressed his thin lips together in tight fury.

The sweat gleamed on Grange's face as he stared at the streaming greyness of the vision-screens, and his bared teeth showed white against his leathery tan. He snapped the braking-rockets to radar control, his hand trembling a fraction of an inch above the blast switch as he watched the screens.

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They ripped down through veil after veil of cloud. On a flat, hard surface, the radar could have brought the ship down with scarcely a bump, but the last layer of this mist might hide anything : jagged rocks, a sloping scree that could topple them sideways, or simply the sea. In any of these cases, Grange might have only a fraction of a second to check their descent by a panic blast of the rockets.

Hollen relaxed his clenched jaw, then snapped it shut again as his teeth chattered. The greyness pulsed into changing waves of fire as the blast stabbed down into it. Suddenly the light flared outward across flat brown ground. Grange's hand shook above the emergency control in a flicker of frenzied indecision—and then they were down, the blast cutting off, the ship jarring and canting five degrees out of the vertical.

For perhaps half a minute neither of them moved or spoke. Slowly, Grange's shaking hands took a cigarette from a pack, moving as though by their own will as he sat with his eyes closed. He looked momentarily much older. Abruptly he opened his eyes and looked across at Hollen.

" Sorry I was a bit quick on the trigger." He gave a forced smile, then immediately chopped his apology apart. " But it was a damn silly time to start yapping."

Hollen shrugged his shoulders and looked back at the screens, switching to lateral view. Part of his mind seemed to be fighting another part. He wanted to say : *Forget it* !—but something stopped the words from coming. *Like hell he'd forget it* ! He felt hot waves of anger, but he didn't know where to direct it. To Grange ? To himself ? To the sketchy data of the charts ?

" Look !" Grange's finger stabbed towards the screen. The driving sleet lashing the ship was thinning like a parting curtain, revealing a downward slope of glistening brown clay. Barely fifty yards away the ground dropped more sharply to racing waves and flying spray, to surf that boiled across a snarling reef. Beyond, there was nothing but a frothing turmoil of sea.

This was the last time, Hollen told himself. Had the wind veered the ship a hundred yards further, even fifty yards further, their voyage of more than ten light-years would have ended in a volcanic blast of steam and exploding rocket-

motors. Whether they made a profit or not, this time he was through. It wasn't worth it.

He was shocked to find that he was speaking aloud, and with a furtive smile he looked across at Grange, half expecting the older man to laugh. But Grange didn't laugh. He looked at him thoughtfully for a while, then stood up, leaning against the chart-table.

" See if you can get this fellow Radstock on the radio." His voice was again crisp and controlled. " I'm going to run an atmosphere check. After this I don't trust their data an inch."

Hollen began transmitting the call, glad of the activity—at least it kept his thoughts away from the narrowness of their escape. As Grange worked on his atmosphere tests, the roar of rain against the metal hull of the ship died to a muted pattering, tailing off into silence broken only by fitful gusts.

" Nothing coming through," said Hollen after a few minutes. " Only the hum of his carrier-wave."

" It's safe to go out. That's something. Ah—"

Grange looked up as the screens lit with a lurid, watery sun-glare. Westward, through the streaks of murk, they had a partial glimpse of the huge orange sun-disc of Epsilon Eridani, its light glancing from a myriad pools on the uneven ground with the shimmer of red-hot iron. The buildings of the trading base lay half a mile from the ship in black silhouette —a gaunt metal tripod structure, a shorter mushroom-shaped tower, and a huddle of low sheds. There was no sign of life about it.

" He answered our call from orbit. Where the hell is he now ?" Hollen kept his voice to a flat monotone in an effort to mask the tension.

Grange began operating the valves of the airlock. "Only one thing to do. Go over there and find out."

" Think it's safe ?"

" *Safe* ? Listen, if you want to play things safe, what are you doing here ?"

As the outer door of the airlock swung open to the raw, wild air, Hollen kept asking himself the same question : What was he doing here ? What was he doing on a two-man interstellar trading ship, with a cargo of midget two-way radios bought largely on credit ?

His life as a commercial traveller on 22nd Century Earth had not been highly rewarding, but at least he had been able to look forward with reasonable certainty to fifty or sixty more years of it. Here, he wasn't sure he'd survive the next fifty minutes.

"Remember the gravity's only point seven," Grange shouted above the blustering wind. "If a gust blows you with it, drop flat! If you run with the wind, it'll roll you into the sea."

Hollen followed him down the metal ladder to the slippery ground, bent double against the mile-a-minute blasts of air as they began to fight their way across-wind towards the base. It was a journey into nightmare for Hollen, but Grange seemed to find a grim satisfaction in coping with the most outlandish conditions.

Sometimes the wind slid them a dozen yards down the slope, but at last they gained the shelter of a wing-wall jutting from the nearest building of the trading station, crouching almost breathless from their exertion in the thin, humid air. Hollen stared as though hypnotised at the sea, which in this combination of light gravity and storm was churned with incredible violence. Suddenly Grange seized his arm.

"Look there!"

A few hundred yards off, a rough breakwater jutted into the sea, and moored against it was some kind of barge. A crane mounted on the breakwater was unloading boxes from the boat, and a number of men were carrying them ashore to a shed.

Men? Hollen shaded his eyes with his hand.

They were humanoid—that was as much as you could say. The height of a man, long-limbed, with rain-wet olive-coloured skin that glistened with the effect of scaliness. Their movements were fluid and supple.

Another figure walked out of the shed—definitely human, this one, a flabbily built man in a hooded yellow plastic overall. He stood as though directing the stacking of the boxes. After a time he turned to look towards the ship, and as Grange waved to attract his attention he beckoned.

Heads ducked against the wind, Grange and Hollen walked towards him, keeping close to the wall for shelter. He moved forward to meet them, hand extended. He was about fifty, his skin dark and blotched from some past overdose of ultra-violet, but grotesquely white around the eyes where it had been shielded by goggles.

" Glad you made it. I'm Radstock. Be with you as soon as the boys get this lot under cover."

Hollen looked at the " boys " with a mixture of fascination and horror. Seen close, they were less human than he had thought. They were not actually reptilian. *Reptiloid* would have been a better word. The skin was definitely scaly across the shoulders and along the outer sides of the limbs, but there was little of the reptile about their heads. They were a disturbing mixture of human and non-human, the round skull well-shaped by human standards but with a dark central crest, the chin pointed and prominent, the eyes wide and light-coloured, green or yellow or orange. When they looked at him their gaze was direct and steady.

Radstock spoke with them in short, incomprehensible phrases of their own language, a complex blend of flowing sibilants and gutterals. Suddenly he turned to Grange and Hollen.

" Let's get in out of this damned wind. I'll pay this guy for his stuff, and then we can get together."

One of the aliens accompanied them towards the building at the base of the mushroom-shaped tower. He was half a head taller than Grange, who stood just over six feet, and he moved with an easy, balanced grace against the wind.

Radstock's office was cluttered and untidy, with metal prefabricated walls and furniture, the floor covered with some woven grass-like matting that must have been produced locally. It was warmed by a strange-looking copper oil-stove of bizarre styling that suggested other-than-human manufacture. Radstock opened a large safe and took out some small boxes, which he placed carefully on the table before locking the safe again. The alien slid the boxes open one by one, occasionally taking out a small block of silver-grey metal to examine it. On one of the boxes Hollen saw a label marked Union City, New Jersey.

The alien packed his boxes carefully in a container, saying something in his own language to Radstock. His face seemed capable of a wide variety of expressions, but they were subtly different from the expressions of a human face. He made a curious gesture, repeated it to Grange and Hollen, then left.

" What did you use to pay him ?" asked Grange.

" Tungsten carbide. Cutting tips for machine-tools."

" What's he do with them ?"

" They're damned good currency here. They have a lot of industrial centres down in the tropics, but they haven't any really hard metals of their own. A few packets of lathe-tools and milling cutters buy a lot of stuff."

Radstock opened a cupboard and took out an unlabelled bottle and three glasses. Hollen looked out of the window facing the quadrangle enclosed by the buildings. Streaks of dark greenish sky showed through the thinning cloud. In one of the lighted windows opposite he saw a movement, and as he was watching a woman's face peered out. He had the impression of a slim woman with shoulder-length blonde hair —then she was gone.

" You're married ?" he asked Radstock.

" Me ? Not now. Not for a long time."

Hollen decided to let it go at that. Radstock began filling the three glasses.

" What's your cargo ?"

" Radios. Two-way, self-powered, full-colour video." Grange took one from his pocket, placing it almost reverently on the table. It was no larger than a cigarette pack, the screen filling one side of it. Radstock looked at it with his lower lip thrust out. He handed around the glasses before he spoke.

" Try this stuff. It's good. They make it from some sort of cane that grows along the marshes down South."

Hollen drank and gasped, holding the glass almost at arm's length. " Got quite a bite, hasn't it ?"

" You get used to it," said Radstock. From a cupboard he took another small radio very similar to Grange's. Grange looked at it with narrowed eyes.

" Brazilian, isn't it ?"

" No. The original one was. We brought some on our first trip here, five-six years ago. Now the Zaii make the things themselves. Mass-produced. Good as the original." He drank quickly. " Whatever you sell them, they pull it to pieces and start mass-producing it."

Grange said nothing.

" They've got quite a civilization here," went on Radstock, refilling his glass. " Cities, seaports, big networks of a sort of railway—not like our railways, but they do the same job."

" Nowhere near as advanced a culture as ours, of course," said Hollen, fighting back a feeling of uneasiness.

Radstock looked reflectively down at his glass. " Hard to compare. Sure, they never got into space. But they could teach us a few things in some fields. Of course, none of us have seen much of the planet. They conceded us this island for trading purposes. The strait out there's about a mile wide. There's a sort of port over on the mainland called Kasso, as near as we can get to their sound for it. I've been there twice, as a special honour, with a blasted guard squad with me all the time. Place smells like a reptile house at a zoo—you know the smell? That, mixed with seaweed and God knows what else."

" What are their buildings like?"

" Queer. Not like ours. Stone, and a lot of glass. They can do weird things with glass. Use it for roads, piers, bridges—don't know how they treat it, but they can make it as strong as iron. Anyway, that's all I've seen. A few miles inland there's a mountain range that goes up like a wall into the clouds."

Grange lit a cigarette. " What's the stuff they were landing from the boat?"

Radstock looked slightly evasive. " Semi-precious stones. Jewelry. Stuff like that. One of the Altarc Corporation's ships is landing here in six days with more carbide—they deal with me, see? The Zaii bring their goods over from Kasso. You saw one of their boats—alcohol engine, paddle wheels. They never seem to have got the idea of a propellor, or maybe too much of their water is fouled up with weed to use one."

" How do they bring the stuff to Kasso?"

" Railway. Overhead cable type, with the cars hanging underneath and running under their own power. I've seen the end of that railway, you know. Other end's in one of their big cities a long way south—place called Serak or Sierik, or Sherrak, something like that. Don't know how far, but it's a long way. Thousand miles, or maybe more."

" How big is it?"

Radstock drained his glass and refilled it. " The city? I don't know. Ten million, twenty million, something like that. Real big. They've got a lot of big cities, down where it's hotter."

Grange looked across at Hollen. " Sounds as if we might be getting some competition one of these days."

" From the Zaii ?" Radstock shook his head. " Don't worry. They're easy to handle. Like a bunch of kids. Put anything over 'em. They take anything you tell them without questioning it—sometimes I get the impression they've never invented the lie."

Grange looked thoughtful. " I'd be careful about that. Any race I've ever met knows how to lie. Even an animal—ever noticed how a cat or a dog can lie to you by its actions, by the way it looks at you, say, when it's done something it knows you won't like ? No, the lie's a pretty basic part of life."

Hollen got to his feet. " Spare us the do-it-yourself philosophy, will you ? I've had enough of that all the way here."

Grange shrugged his shoulders. " Okay. Go right ahead and stick your neck out. Me, I play it safe."

" Safe ?" Hollen felt his lips twisting. " You come ten light-years to a place where there's no proper information available, with a cargo we won't be able to get rid of as a gift ; you land in cloud within a couple of yards of the sea ; you—Hell, what's the use ?" He turned towards the window. Through rifts in the cloud the sky showed jet-black, thickly dusted with stars.

" It's clearing outside," he said irrelevantly.

" Generally does during the night," said Radstock.

The fast movement of the cloud unveiled a small crimson moon. A shimmer of phosphorescence played across the dark water.

" Say, I think I'll take a walk outside."

" Nothing to see around here," muttered Radstock.

Hollen hesitated, then moved towards the door. " See you later."

Outside, there was a profound stillness except for the lapping murmur of water. Hollen walked across the uneven ground to the breakwater, and stood for a time examining the crane mounted on it, using his small pocket flashlight.

The gearing, the power-unit, the curiously made chains were the product of an engineering technology that was not human. In its overall shape, governed by its function, the device was little different from cranes made by human beings. The differences came in details, small in themselves, but covering every component of the machine.

It made him vaguely uneasy. He would have liked to have been able to dismiss the thing as a crude, primitive structure,

hopelessly inferior to a man-made counterpart. But it wasn't. Its workmanship, its design were sound and clean and efficient.

He walked thoughtfully back past the shed, and up into the wide quadrangle between the other buildings. As he was passing one a door opened suddenly, and a broad beam of white light shone out across the ground. Framed in the doorway was the silhouette of a slim woman in a long sheath dress, with the light behind her shining through shoulder-length blonde hair. Hollen stopped involuntarily in mid-stride.

" Good evening," he said, shading his eyes against the light.

" I wondered who was walking about." Her voice was soft and level, with a peculiar accent he couldn't place.

" I just arrived today. Came here on a trading trip."

" Yes." The way she said it, it didn't seem quite the right word. He expected her to say more, or to move inside and close the door, but she did neither. She simply stood there, not as though she had become tongue-tied, but looking at him calmly as if she were content to study him for the rest of the night.

" I don't think we've met," he said. " My name is Peter Hollen."

She didn't answer. He couldn't see her face in the shadow, and he had the uncomfortable feeling that she might be wondering if he was mad.

" Do you want to talk with me ?" she asked unexpectedly.

It was Hollen's turn to be expressionless. " Yes," he said.

She stood aside from the door. " Come inside."

In the lighted room, Hollen forgot what he had decided to say only a few seconds before. The woman's huge almond-shaped eyes were as green as emerald, and her skin was smooth and tanned, with a peculiar olive tinge. Her face had a delicate strangeness about it, and her whole body was incredibly slender and graceful. As she moved, he caught a wave of rather cheap perfume that seemed somehow to clash with her appearance.

It was her hands that gave him the first clue—inhumanly slim and flexible, with narrow, dark nails. They were a smaller, more finely-textured version of other hands he had seen somewhere—just recently.

The picture came vividly to his mind. Green-tinted prehensile hands, sliding open a box of tungsten carbide. The hands of the alien in Radstock's office.

The blonde hair, the vivid crimson lips, the thick pancake make-up looked shockingly obvious now, yet he had to admit to himself that she had a certain beauty. He wondered what lay beneath the hair—probably a narrow dark crest like those of the other Zaii.

" You come from Kasso ?" he asked.

" No. From far away. From the hot lands."

" You look like some of the girls of our people."

She nodded very slightly. " I have seen pictures. While I assist Radstock, it is better to look like his people."

Hollen looked at her silently for a time. She didn't seem to mind his uninterrupted scrutiny, calmly returning it. He was the first to look away, and immediately he felt irritation.

" My name is Peter Hollen. Did I tell you ?"

She nodded again. " I am called Kaia. Where is your home ?"

He found himself relaxing slightly. " Earth. That's the home planet of our race."

" I have seen Radstock's moving pictures of parts of it. He often looks at them. I would like to see it for myself."

Hollen looked at her thoughtfully, the first seeds of an idea germinating in his mind.

" That might be possible," he said.

She looked at him very steadily. There were just enough subtle differences between her features and human features to make it impossible for him to read her expression. Her level gaze might have shown warm interest, or it could have been a calculating assessment. The pupils of the emerald eyes dilated and contracted in a series of pulsations that was different from any movement he had seen in other eyes. It might have had some significance for another of the Zaii, but it meant nothing to him.

The idea in the back of his mind was growing rapidly.

" Let me tell you about Earth," he began . . .

Next day they unloaded the ship. Several of the Zaii alcohol-engined boats moored at the breakwater, and Grange did his best to interest the steady-eyed aliens in the two-way radios. They were unimpressed. They brought similar radios of their own from their boats, and gave a counter-demonstration.

The pictures on the Zai radios seemed oddly discoloured compared with those of the Earth-built models. Grange, with Radstock translating, tried to use this as a selling-point

for his goods, until Radstock, after listening to the aliens, pointed out that their eyes saw a different range of frequencies. To them, it was the Earth-built radio that gave the off-coloured image.

To Zai eyes, the local product was far superior to the tens of thousands that Grange and Hollen were trying to sell them. They traded exactly three—not for use, but for the curiosity of a device which the Zaii regarded as an alien artifact. Radstock told Grange that they were destined to be sent to some form of museum.

The Zaii were more interested in pictures of Earth and other planets, but Grange's stock of these was small. He had staked everything on the trading value of the radios. And he had obviously lost—badly.

While Grange was contemplating his stocks in a mood that did not invite any communication whatever, Hollen found Kaia suddenly at his side.

" Do you wish to eat with me when the day ends ?" she asked.

" Why—sure. I'd be delighted."

She nodded gracefully. " Today I go to Kasso. I return later."

She boarded one of the boats when it was about to leave for the mainland, and Hollen watched as it disappeared into the mists across the choppy brown water. When he returned to Grange he was whistling.

" What the hell have you got to whistle about ?" snapped Grange.

" Oh, nothing. Just an idea."

" Better be a good one. We've hauled this junk ten light-years for next to nothing. Might as well dump it in the sea."

" I've got a feeling something's going to break our way."

" What ?"

" Tell you later."

After the middle of the day the rain and the wild wind began, lifting the waves in a slowly mounting frenzy. Looking out from the room Radstock had given to Grange to use as a temporary office, he saw one of the Zai boats scudding away across the strait, and he wondered if Kaia had returned.

He went along to the main building, and as he reached it he heard her voice, then Radstock's.

" But the risk," Radstock was saying. He said something else in Zai.

She answered in her own language, and at that moment Hollen reached the open door of the office. Kaia was standing in front of Radstock's desk, in a rain-wet cloak of some glistening material like shark-skin. She looked at him, and Radstock followed her glance, focussing his reddened eyes with some difficulty as he sprawled back in his chair, a glass in his hand.

"Am I interrupting something?" asked Hollen, his eyes taking in the three bottles standing empty on the stained desk. Radstock looked at him in puzzled anger, as if he was trying to make up his mind about something.

Kaia said a single word that sounded something like "korab," with a rising inflection. She made a slight gesture with a package she held in her hands. Through the open end of it Hollen could see the edges of a thick wad of the woven mats of green metallic strands the Zaii used for currency. Evidently Kaia had traded something for Radstock on the mainland.

"What good is that stuff to you?" he asked Radstock. Then he looked pointedly at the empty bottles and winked. "I suppose it buys plenty of the local juice."

Radstock's flabby face suddenly hardened with anger. Then he seemed to make up his mind about something. He took the package of Zai money from Kaia and locked it in the safe, then stood looking out of the window. Kaia looked across at Hollen.

"You come to my place in sixty minutes. We eat."

Hollen bowed. "Thanks," he said.

The food Kaia had prepared was strange, but some of it was highly appetizing. Hollen found her easier to talk to. He was even able to laugh about their error in bringing radios to a planet which produced them in millions.

She showed him her own television set, which owed nothing to Terrestrial design. Her people had been making them for a very long time—a time that must have been measured in hundreds, even thousands of years. Its circular screen showed a variety of coloured pictures from many channels—fantastic dances, figures of Zaii talking in their strange language, kaleidoscopic colour-patterns of curious beauty. He looked inside the set, at what he had taken to be a cathode-ray tube, but the set did not operate by electronic scanning. It built its picture by a fluctuating light-source directed through eccentrically-spinning lenses.

Hollen told her many things about Earth, leaving out everything unpleasant and building up a vision of a glittering paradise. She listened with silent, concentrated attention.

When he returned to the main building an hour later, he found Grange working through his accounts with a slide-rule and innumerable pieces of paper.

"Listen," began Hollen. "I'm on to something big. Something that's going to put us really in the money."

Grange leaned back, taking a cigarette from the pack lying on the table. "What do you mean?"

Hollen sat close alongside him. "You know this girl of Radstock's?"

"The one that he gets to wear make-up like a magazine cheesecake? What about her?"

"We're taking her to Earth."

Grange coughed in the act of lighting his cigarette. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Look. It could make us millions. A tour from city to city. Millions of people are going to pay to see a real live—"

Grange slammed his fist on the table. "Have you been drinking that lunatic soup of Radstock's? Where are your brains, man?"

"Listen. Suppose—this is just a technicality—suppose I took her to Earth as my wife? There's no law against that. Not yet." Hollen grinned. "As captain of our tub, I believe you have the authority—"

"You can damn well go to hell! Get a grip on yourself!"

Hollen stood up. "You mean you won't do it?"

"Get out of my sight!"

At the door, Hollen looked back. "There's a ship due here in five days. I want you to pay me off."

"You mean you're quitting?"

Hollen nodded. Grange drew sharply on his cigarette.

"Now, wait a minute. No need to go up in the air about this."

Hollen smiled. "Starting to worry about flying your tub back alone?"

Grange's chair overturned with a crash as he sprang to his feet. He took two steps towards Hollen, then halted, his eyes bleak and pale. When he spoke again his voice was quiet.

"I'll give you your money in the morning. Now—*out*!"

As Hollen walked away he heard the door slam behind him. He shrugged his shoulders and went to the room Radstock

had given him during his stay here. There was a ringing in his ears, a growing sense of weird unreality about everything. He wondered whether it was the effect of the strange food he had eaten.

He did not remember falling asleep.

The following morning, Hollen awoke ill and weak. The wide orange sun was already high in the sky, its disc not yet masked by the clouds that would grow during the day.

He tried to get up, then sat swaying on the edge of the bed. Suddenly he became aware that Kaia was in the room, sitting watching him.

"You will be well, soon," she said. "You have a fever that all Earth people seem to have when they first come here. I will take you to one of our doctors—on the mainland."

"But—I'll be all right."

She did not reply, but rose and walked to a table near the window, pouring some liquid from a curiously shaped phial into a glass. Then she moved silently towards him.

"Drink this."

The stuff had a bitter, unfamiliar flavour. After he had taken it she went quietly away.

He must have slept for a time. He awoke to find two of the Zaii lifting him from the bed, while Kaia stood by the door. He had the confused impression of being carried down to the breakwater. He had another brief period of consciousness with the smell of the sea strong in his nostrils, in a cramped room that pitched with the movement of waves and vibrated to the pounding of an engine.

It was all extremely vague, pictures filtering through a haze of fever. He had one moment of relative clarity, lying on a seat or bench in some open, shaded place, amid grotesque buildings with twisted domes of multicoloured glass. Running into the distance was a line of structures he at first took to be the pylons of an electric transmission line. They were surmounted by heavy transverse girders supporting two thick, taut-stretched cables. Something was coming along one of the cables, a long, cylindrical thing, pointed at the nose, with windows along its sides. It hung from wheels beneath the cable, and a thin, barely-visible stream of exhaust-gases jetted from it.

He tried to rise to a sitting position, and immediately he felt Kaia's arm around him.

" Don't move. You have illness. Bad for you to move."

He felt the cold touch of the phial against his lips. Her voice was soothing. Some of the fluid from the phial trickled from the corner of his mouth, and she wiped it gently away.

" You will be well soon. Just rest."

The journey was interminable. Sometimes he slept. Sometimes he lay looking up at the roof of the compartment in which he lay, stretched full-length along a seat while Kaia sat opposite. At regular intervals the shadows of the pylons flicked past the windows, and the car would droop slightly in its flight and then climb to the next pylon. Sometimes the intervals were very long, as if the cable spanned a wide valley or river.

Once, watching Kaia looking intently out of the window, he made a gigantic effort and lifted himself so that he could peer out. They were hundreds of feet above steaming jungle that filled a valley between mountains that vanished on either side into greenish mist. A vast river roared beneath in a brown, turgid flood, thundering over a mighty cateract that sent spray rising to mingle with the misty cloud. At one side of the cateract was a building that might have been a great generating station.

Kaia was incredibly patient and gentle and unselfish. Hollen thought of his plan for taking her to Earth with sudden horror. He wondered how he could ever have been callous enough to think of it. She had trusted him completely—and he would have betrayed her.

He didn't see much of Serak, or Sherrak, or Sierik—whatever they called it. The journey had taken several days and nights—he had no idea how many. Once they had travelled across sea, but when they entered the city they were again in an overhead rail-car. He had a confused idea of a panorama of towering, unearthly buildings of many-tinted glass and avenues streaming with swift-moving vehicles.

It should have looked like a Terrestrial city, but it didn't, in spite of the avenues and the buildings. There was an alien touch in every detail. From their earliest steps towards civilization, the two races had taken different roads, and somehow they seemed to have evolved different ways of solving almost every problem.

Kaia gave him another drink from the phial, and he slept for a long time. When he awoke he was in darkness, and at once he drifted off to sleep again.

Next time he awoke there was bright light, and three figures in skin-tight white clothing. Something like a hypodermic syringe stabbed his arm—and then there was darkness again.

But the mists cleared from his mind within minutes. He sat up, feeling hungry and completely alert. He called Kaia's name, but there was no reply.

Experimentally, he flexed his muscles. He had never felt better. A new thought flashed into his mind. He *had* something here ! Something that could bring him far more money than exhibiting Kaia on Earth. These people must have a knowledge of medical science that Earth would pay for highly.

He heard a rustling murmur, like voices in a huge theatre, and listened. A single voice began speaking in that outlandish tongue they used. Kaia's voice—he was sure of it !

Suddenly he heard low voices near him in the dark. The floor under him moved, as if he were in some sort of truck. He stood up, swaying, and his outflung hand met inch-thick bars of cold metal. A heavy curtain swished aside, revealing the bright light of a stage facing an immense auditorium.

Kaia stood confidently erect in the centre of the stage under spotlights, and as they pushed Hollen forward he, too, became the focal point of a web of light. He was in a large metal cage.

" Kaia !" he shouted. " What's this ?"

She looked at him coolly, all trace of her human-style make-up gone, her green-lipped face completely alien. After that one glance she turned to face her audience, gesturing calmly towards him.

Faces. A thousand, five thousand faces, none of them human. Suddenly Hollen understood it all—the illness that had come after the meal, the drink she had used to keep him doped, the money she had given to Radstock.

He seized the bars of the cage, straining at them until his muscles knotted with cramp. Suddenly he shouted, and when he realised his words meant nothing he lifted his voice in a savage, inarticulate scream.

Kaia's audience was most impressed. She was pleased.

Her first lecture had got away to an excellent start . . .

Wynne N. Whiteford

The paradox of Time is a fascinating speculation, especially in the science fiction field, and will probably be one of the genre's perennial forms of plot. What we do not often run across is the story that takes us forward to almost the end of Earth's allotted existence.

THE PATHFINDERS

by DONALD MALCOLM

"Well," Shirreff said, "I suppose this is it."

His older companion, Grassick, nodded.

Side by side, they strolled purposefully along the pristine, tiled corridors of the Parapsychological Research Centre, as if they were two house surgeons on the rounds.

Ahead from a side corridor, they heard a sudden surge of conversation.

"How was it Saxon?"

"Yes, tell us!"

The voices were young and keen and eager.

"A thousand year jump? Oooh . . . nothing much to worry about. I took it in my stride."

The reply was boastful and condescending.

The two men exchanged smiles and remembered how they had been much the same in their Cadet days, for Shirreff, only three years before.

The two groups of walkers met, the one silent, the other bubbling with talk.

Then Saxon, a slight, sandy-haired boy, saw the two men, dressed in their one-piece bottle green coveralls with the platinum, star-surrounded 'T.T.' on their left breasts.

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He drew back deferentially and hurriedly shushed the others. Shirreff and Grassick smiled at them and continued their stroll.

" What was all that about ?" one voice demanded in a loud whisper.

" You mean you don't *know* ?" Saxon was askance. " They're Shirreff and Grassick ! Each of those stars indicates a jump ten million years further than the last. And they each have nine stars !"

The thought rose automatically in both men's minds ; *soon it will be ten stars.*

They reached a door lettered, Dr. DANIEL ROY : PRIVATE. Knocking, they entered.

" That will be all for now," Roy dismissed his secretary, and gave his attention to the two newcomers.

" Grab a chair."

He drew a notepad within easy reach and said, " All the reports have been phoned in. Both of you are in tip-top condition, physically and mentally."

" Was there ever any doubt, Dan ?" Archie Grassick, commented lightly.

" I suppose not. Anyway, being the senior of the two, you will be in charge."

His gaze swivelled to Shirreff. " Hear that, Tom ?" The tall, spare man nodded.

" You're going further than anyone has ever ventured before. One hundred million years. You've been chosen for all the obvious reasons. I'm not going into them again. One thing I must impress on you "—his commanding eyes held them—" if you venture beyond that time, the chances are you won't come back. That seems to be the limit."

" I don't think we'd risk it, Dan," Grassick assured him. " I remember how difficult it was to get back from ninety-million."

" Besides," Shirreff chipped in, " we can't be sure of conditions much further ahead. The computers aren't *that* good."

Roy looked down at his hands.

" Isn't it queer, a man cannot teleport himself one angstrom in space and yet he can teleport through time." He shook his white-haired head in wonder. " Who ever thought when we started research on people with latent psi talents that this would happen ?"

He rose and they followed him through a door marked TEMPORAL TRANSITION, where he helped them into the double harness that would keep them together in time. A minimum of equipment was carried : concentrated food capsules, breathing apparatus, tiny cameras, temporal vernier, wrist model.

He bade them both good luck and went back to his own office. The transition was always made alone. Too many people and fussing tended to break the intense concentration needed to throw two bodies through time.

Five minutes later, the room was empty. Roy reflected that, to them, he was already dust, his atoms forming other people, animals and plants. Somehow, the thought calmed him, to know that, in the future, he was still around somewhere. He sighed and went off to see how the telekinetics people were faring. That was another strange aspect of the work. They had found women who manifested all the psi talents—except temporal teleportation.

The beach was long and smooth. The sea was glassy, featureless, endless, like a great mirror. A gigantic, bloated, dull red Sun blotted out half the sky and tinged the sea, as if with blood.

The Creature, whose brain centre rested just above the beach, had lost count of the time it had existed. It was aware that its extensions spanned most of the tiny world. It had four-dimensional awareness and could roam at will backwards and forwards in the stream of time into the mists of millions of years ; but not to its own beginning.

The planet itself was lifeless, cringing under the malevolent star. The Creature had all but sucked it dry. It had adapted to sustain itself on atmospheric oxygen and hydrogen from the ocean.

Nothing moved to impinge on its infrared sensory perceptors. Nothing *ever* moved.

And now it was dying. It knew that its actual death was many thousand of years ahead but the process had already begun. Now it had no response in the more distant extensions and it was gradualy losing the abili·ty to regenerate healthy ones.

Whenever it dwelt on the subject of death, of extinction, it saw that darkening of the pictures in the time stream and was afraid. A great longing, almost a hunger, seemed to well up

and course through every atom of its being. Despite a lifetime of nine million years, it had no way of translating the elusive conception into understandable terms.

The longing, the need, would be replaced by an emptiness that did not bear contemplation and the Creature sought refuge in reminiscing into time, nearly always to the past. Only the silver city drew it forward to the future, near the time of its own death.

A mere sixteen thousand years . . . was that all the time that had passed since the space craft from a remote galaxy had landed? The occupants, queer, snake like things, had had a silicon base . . . it had enjoyed them . . .

Eighty-four thousand years . . . a great, hitherto unknown comet had been trapped in the planetary gravitational field and its shattered particles had given the world a wonderful ring system, girdling the equator in subservient grandeur.

The Creature was suddenly restive. Something was moving —through *time*. It probed. Further, further, further, eight million years. Two objects, rushing effortlessly up the temporal stream, flashing past events. Too far back to ascertain what they were.

Plenty of time to find out. A lassitude had crept over the Creature. It went back to reminiscing.

That stupendous supernova explosion . . . how long ago . . . two million years . . . and on this planet, it had been the only witness to one of the mightiest catastrophies in all space.

The objects moved nearer, shrugging hundreds of thousands of years aside as if they had never existed.

The Creature pushed back to the period of the last natural life form that had inhabited this planet. Low, thin, clouds drifted in from the sea like long dead wraiths.

They were long, flat sleek beings, with taloned feet for grubbing in the dying soil for the comparatively few remaining insects and roots. They had been socially and linguistically well advanced. It had taken the Creature thousands of years to exterminate this last race. For aeons it had been the sole inhabitant of the Earth.

The objects came on, passing in their headlong dash Ice Age after Ice Age, and Warm Period after Warm Period. In space, mighty interstellar and intergalactic empires rose and fell. Myriads of stars ran down to the dark, lightless decadence of old age. In galaxy after galaxy, little globules of gas made the

final gravitational contraction and began to shine the news of their births with the message of light.

The objects were only five million years away. The Creature probed into the temporal stream with all its planet-wide senses. The intruders were organic in nature.

The Creature searched its memory cells, discarding millions of data per second. Finally, if it could have puffed in disbelief, if would have.

The things were outside its experience and presumably came for a time before its birth !

But was there ever a time before its birth ? Was it not the Beginning ? It wondered, puzzled.

These things were pre-everything.

The Creature waited with anticipation.

Finally they raced the last few thousands of years and emerged into the present. The time travellers came to rest on the beach.

They stood warily and uneasily on the lifeless sand, gazing around them with a mixture of awe and of excitement.

" *Look* at the place !" Grassick breathed, his eyes bright with wonder. " One hundred million years—give or take a few thousand, I suppose."

The sea was turgid, a dull metallic grey tinged with mauve-red. Lifeless, smooth, menacing. Underfoot, nothing scurried or crawled or leapt. The beach swept away in a strained white curve, like a sacrificial altar or a bloody scimitar blade. The hinterland was absolutely barren, almost flat as far as the eye could see. Here and there, pitiful outcroppings of harsh rock stood up, like mute testimonies to other, more rugged, landscapes than this.

Overhanging, prevading the whole scene was the baleful glare of the bloated Sun, a malevolent god hungry for a sacrifice. The sky was black overhead, shading off in pasty crimsons and purples. Timid stars shone in unrecognisable patterns. Low clouds rolled in from the uncaring sea, making the whole scene resemble a pre-view of Hell. The ring system was a pale band of scarlet light at the horizon, like purity amidst evil.

The Creature watched. The two men hadn't moved off the spot, standing as if they were rooted. Gently it probed their minds.

Grassick took a couple of steps forward. " See that Sun, Tom !" He brought his tiny camera into play as he spoke and

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Shirreff followed suit. " A red giant, distended, gorged, its surface temperature only about 3000°K. Mercury and Venus were swallowed up millions of years ago."

Shirreff remarked, " They'll be able to make comparisons at P.R.C. with the data we gathered at ninety million."

"That's right . . . I think the Moon's out there somewhere, about a million miles distant, if the calculations are correct. I doubt if we'll see it."

Tom crouched down, lifted a handful of sand and let it run through his fingers. He gazed out to the horizon.

" I wish we could have a better view of that ring system. It must be beautiful."

" No chance, I'm afraid. We always come to the same geographical location, no matter what the time.

The Creature was amazed, excited, titivated. What its perceptors had relayed couldn't be true. It had no recollection of such beings. Their general form was crude and they employed physical means of communication. And their minds—the full contents of which it had absorbed, analysed and studied in seconds—were of a most primitive and elementary nature, capable of comprehending only the simplest concepts.

And yet, it sensed that something else was there, shining deep within them. Somehow the something seemed to transcend the merely chemical level, having a powerful life force of its own. The Creature probed deeper and caught the conception of extinction, which these beings considered, not the end, but only the beginning of life ! Was this the answer to the elusive longing, to the fear of a bottomless nothingless ? Belief, faith, the soul, God ?

The something, so vital in these beings, was apparently only microscopic parts of this greater thing, God, which encompassed all of space and time and matter and energy.

A great mental tremor ran through the Creature, reaching its farthest extensions. Its perceptors looked at the Sun, stars, the sky, the sea, the land. That something, God, was it there ?

The Creature had detected an inner peace in both beings, no fear of extinction. Part of them was almost anxious for death to come, so that they could enter the new life.

Nearer the surface of their minds, it sensed in the one being the renewed desire to have a better view of the ring system and in the other a conflict that made him want to avoid his fellow beings, to escape ; but where ?

The Creature had received something from them, although they didn't know it, and it sought to repay the gift.

With the immense power of its mind, it lifted Shirreff and transported him near to the equator where the ring system was arrayed in all its glory almost overhead.

In Grassick's mind, it induced a dream of the silver city that lay ahead in time.

" Grassick ! I *saw* it ! The ring system !"

" And I had a wonderful dream . . . but first to tell me what happened to you."

The two men sat down on the beach, like two small boys about to dig sandcastles. There was an eagerness in them, never experienced before. It shone from their eyes.

" Archie—I was actually *there*. It felt like teleportation. If it was, I didn't do it of my own volition. I saw the rings at a slight angle, not quite overhead, so I couldn't have been on the actual equator. It was a magnificent sight." The memory brought a lump to his throat. He trickled sand through his fingers as he went on. " The rings are across the whole sky, glittering with palest scarlet-lilac fire. They seemed to dwarf the menace of that monstrous Sun. My insides felt twisted with the ineffable beauty of it. I'm almost tempted to try and go back there. One *knows* there has to be a God to create a scene like that. The composition is perfect and the colours have a life of their own. I could almost sense the vibration of every individual atom in the Sun, the rings, the clouds and the sea."

He found Grassick's eyes upon him, compassionate and unwavering. He asked, " Can anything be so beautiful that your heart feels almost wrung dry simply by the sight ?"

Grassick nodded. " While you were gone, I had a dream, of the future." He grasped both Shirreff's hands in his. "There's a city ahead in time : a magnificent, silver city. How far on it is I don't know, but the Sun is smaller and the sky is purplish-black."

Releasing the other's hands, he went on, " The city is constructed of some kind of glass-like material. It has slim towers, so fragile looking that you would think a mere breath could set them all tingling like Christmas decorations. Thin flyovers form the connecting links and I saw air cars flitting about."

He shifted his position. " There's green grass in the city—perfect lawns—and masses of flowers I couldn't recognise, in

colours stolen from the very hearts of the stars. And the people are human in appearance, but golden-skinned, tall and graceful. They might not even be human, as we know the term."

A silence filtered down, surrounding them. "We'll never know where they came from," Shirreff said. "We must go back and report." He rose, brushing sand off his coverall.

Grassick looked up at him. "I'm not going back."

"What! Not going back?" He dropped to his knees. "But you must!"

The older man shook his head. "Why should I? What's back there for me? This will be my last jump, I feel it. If I return, I'll be stuck in my own time as securely as a butterfly pinned to a board."

"Archie—"

"Can't you understand, Tom? I've seen the city. I couldn't bear the thought of it, forever unattainable." Tears glittered in his eyes.

Both men stood up as if pulled by the same string.

"Here is what you must do. Go back to P.R.C. and persuade Roy that he must instigate a search for a woman teleport, preferably a young one."

He glanced around him. "There is something here with power beyond our comprehension. I believe it is benevolent. If a young couple were to come forward to this time, they could seed the future. I'm sure conditions could be endured and the entity would help."

"And you?"

"I will go ahead as the pathfinder."

"Can you be sure of finding this city in time?"

The sky began to darken as the giant sun tumbled towards the horizon.

"I will find it," Grassick said, with conviction. "The dream was revealed to me for a purpose and the entity that induced it will guide me."

He shook hands with Shirreff. "I will not say good-bye. I'll be waiting for your children."

Shirreff stood alone on the beach. He turned his gaze towards the rings and knew he would come back, to extend man's frontiers in time.

Then he, too, was gone.

A great peace settled over the Earth.

Donald Malcolm

A new book from James Blish, now established as one of the top science-fiction writers on both sides of the Atlantic, should be an occasion for rejoicing, but after a good run of hits, his latest **A Clash of Cymbals** (Faber and Faber, 13/6) is disappointing—for Blish. I came across the closing story of the Okie series last year when it saw paper-back publication only as *The Triumph of Time*, and on this second reading I found it just as difficult to assimilate. It is definitely a winner for the dyed-in-the-wool *science*-fiction fan who will glory in its hyper-complexities (I instinctively checked the title again to make sure it was " Cymbals " and not " Symbols " wherein the spindizzies serve their ultimate purpose in solving the overwhelming problem of time coming to an end.

An ingenious theory this—of our universe of normal matter expanding, unwinding and running-down towards its inevitable heat-death as " somewhere nearby " a duplicate universe of contra-terrene matter, as vast and as complex, is contracting, winding up and approaching its concentration of mass and energy called the monobloc. Out of the meeting point of the two reversed entropies a new universe will be created, and our old friend Mayor Amalfi, with the help of the returned wanderers, the Hevians, ensures that the new creation will be different for mankind. An epic of awesome scope which gets bogged down frequently in sesquipedalian scientific mumbo-jumbo (sorry, technical jargon) and, apart from Amalfi, cardboard characterisation, enlived only by some interesting theological aspects of his theory and the truly dramatic climax. Not vintage Blish but still better science-fiction than most these days, and definitely recommended for the hardened enthusiast.

In The Canopy of Time (Faber and Faber, 15/-) Brian Aldiss presents his most satisfying science-fiction book to date. It is a collection of eleven stories, some probably familiar to Nova readers, now revised and collated in chronological order to form a new potted " future history " encompassing random facets of mankind's galactic civilization expanding into the far

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distant future, breathtaking in scope and culminating in the final breakdown of the galaxy (coincidence?) and the emergence of man's successor. Aldiss' lively enquiring mind touches on such fascinating ideas as the gestalt mind, cybernetics, future social codes and the fate of misfits, mutation and incredible medical diagnosis, a wonderfully bitter episode of future visual artform, controlled genetics, and spatial war a la Doc Smith. A coruscation of a book this, product of a fertile imagination and an able literary style.

Other books to note are two more additions to the Jules Verne reprint collection (" Fitzroy Edition " edited by I. O. Evans) namely, **From Earth to The Moon** and **Round The Moon** (both Bernard Hanison, 12/6) readable translations of the old master of science-fiction. Also an excellent paper-back of Robert Sheckley's **Pilgrimage to Earth** (Corgi, 2/6.), containing 15 short stories mainly reprinted from *Galaxy Science Fiction.* Recommended.

Leslie Flood

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